

AWAKENED BY
THE LORD'S
KISS

MEGHAN SLOAN

Awakened By The Lord's Kiss

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

MEGHAN SLOAN

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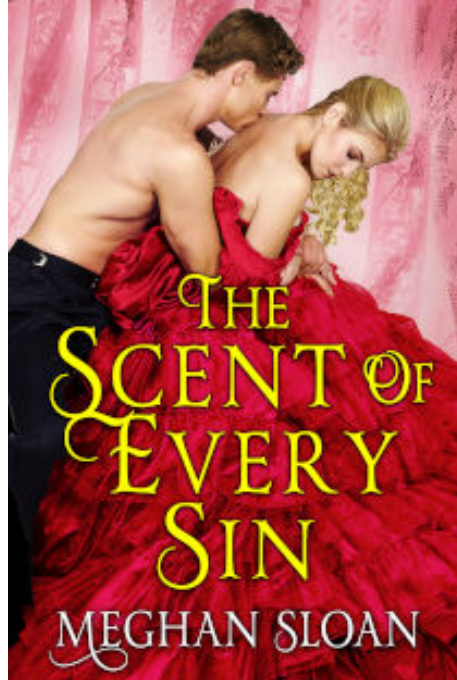
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Awakened By The Lord's Kiss

Introduction

The fiery Caroline Folton harbours a deep hatred for Henry Beaufort that dates back to their childhood. Even a couple of encounters is all it takes for her to conclude he's the worst person on earth. However, upon meeting again in their adult years, Caroline is shocked to discover that a burning desire for him begins to grow inside her...

When she's supposed to detest him, why does she suddenly find him so scandalously enticing?

Henry has been the scapegoat all his life; everyone thinks he's the troublemaker, the bad brother. His deepest desire though is that Caroline would have no hatred for him if she learned the truth about his character... Although her beautiful eyes haunt his dreams every night, things become more complicated when his brother decides that she is a conquest he can easily win.

Will Henry be able to fight against his brother's wishes and be with the woman who has reawakened his passion and captured his heart?

As fate conspires to bring them together once more, Henry and Caroline can't stop fantasising about sinful and intimate moments with each other. Will their lustful romance be enough to completely change Caroline's mind about Henry? Will their passionate affair triumph over

every obstacle, including Henry's own brother?

Chapter 1

1808

Caroline jumped down the last couple of steps, just out of reach of her maid, and ran down the hall with loud giggles.

“Lady Caroline, please!” Marie grabbed onto the rail before she fell, getting her footing and hurrying after her. “Not so loud! You know your mother doesn’t like loud noises.”

“I’ll stop if you manage to catch me!” Caroline shouted back. “You promised to play chase!”

“But not downstairs!” Marie winced as her voice rose. “You’re supposed to be having your lessons, young lady.”

Caroline merely laughed and danced away as her maid-governess grabbed at her. She wasn’t going to be caught. Marie barely ran, so it was easy to keep out of reach. Her lessons were boring right now, and Caroline thought they could liven it up a bit by playing a game. Marie had been agreeable with it in the beginning, but now she was starting to complain. As she always did.

She was very boring.

Darting away as her maid tried to reach for her again, Caroline ran

back down the hall. Only to skid and stumble to a halt when her mother's voice boomed through the house.

"Oh, for goodness sake, Caroline! Would you stop that caterwauling?"

Ann Folton, Lady Bingham, came out from the morning room, pressing her fingers to her temples with a pained expression. She didn't look happy about being disrupted. For a moment, Caroline wavered. Lady Bingham was a strict woman with minimal sympathy for anyone, especially her own family. Upsetting her was not something Caroline wanted to do often, but she couldn't help herself. Her mother made a fuss over something so small, and it was ridiculous.

"I'm only playing, Mother!" she protested as Lady Bingham glared at her. "What's wrong with having fun?"

"You're supposed to be doing your lessons right now, not running around like an uncouth little brat," Lady Bingham snapped. She winced as she rubbed her head. "How am I supposed to concentrate when you're giving me a headache?"

"Concentrate on what, Mother?"

Caroline knew that was the wrong thing to say as soon as it left her mouth, but she couldn't help it. Lady Bingham didn't do anything. She just sat in a room and read or stared out of the window. Caroline couldn't remember the last time her mother had done something that wasn't reading or watching the world go by. As far as she knew, everything was organised by her father, while her mother simply went about her life, which was simply sitting and doing a lot of reading.

Lady Bingham's face went red, her nostrils flaring.

"That's enough, child!" she hissed. "You do not speak to me like that!"

Caroline shrank back a little, wishing she could run the other way and hide, but her legs wouldn't move.

"Forgive me, Mother," she mumbled. "I didn't mean to speak out of turn."

Her mother snorted, turning her glare onto Marie.

"I thought we discussed this, Marie? You said you would be able to keep her quiet during the day."

"Forgive me, Lady Bingham." Marie's face was bright red in her embarrassment as she hurried to Caroline's side. "I've been trying to get her to be quiet all morning. She's a little sprightly today."

"I've noticed." Lady Bingham sighed and waved a hand. "Just get her out of the house. If she needs to get some of that ghastly noise out, she needs to be outside. Not in here while I'm trying to get things done."

Caroline was about to ask what she was doing that required her to be quiet, but Marie grabbed her arm and began to tug her towards the front door.

“Come on, Lady Caroline. Let’s go for a walk outside.”

Caroline wanted to protest – she didn’t want to go out when it was still wet from the morning rain – but she could tell that her mother was going to start shouting and would have her locked in her room with nothing to entertain herself. She had a habit of doing that when she was in a bad mood, which was often.

She wished that her father was home. Lewis Folton, Lord Bingham, was an amiable man who doted on Caroline. He showed her the love and affection she craved, while her mother was cooler and no-nonsense. It was rare to see Lady Bingham smile and enjoy herself when she was with her husband and daughter. Caroline couldn’t understand why her mother got married in the first place, seeing as she wasn’t a motherly or affectionate person.

But she had learned not to question things a while ago, even if her curiosity got the better of her.

Marie helped her into her coat, shrugging hers on as they left the house and headed down the drive. It had been raining for most of the morning, so things were still rather overcast, and everything was wet. But Caroline had to admit that the smell right after it rained was really nice. She liked to lean out of her window and let the air fill her nostrils right after a storm. The only thing better was the roses from their garden. Caroline did love her roses. When she grew up, she wanted her own little garden full of as many roses as possible. That would be her happy spot.

A place that was hers where nobody would intrude. Even though it was just her, Caroline never seemed to have time to herself. It was

really frustrating that she couldn't even have a moment alone. Whatever she could get was snatched, and it was brief before someone came to find her. Lady Bingham wanted someone with eyes on her daughter all the time. She claimed that Caroline was too boisterous and too much of a nuisance to be on her own for long. It was not fair that her own mother didn't trust her.

Was it because she could only have one child, so that meant she was a little too concerned with keeping her daughter safe? Or was it because she wanted to know where her child was at all times so she could be kept away? Caroline knew Lady Bingham liked to do her own things, and they weren't for children. Her tastes and interests were more focused on rising through Society. Her husband wasn't too fussed about it, but Lady Bingham saw it as a personal task.

Caroline had asked her father about it a while ago. She wanted to know why her mother was cold towards her. Lord Bingham had been tactful in his answer, saying that Lady Bingham had an upbringing where her own parents were cold, and that was what she knew. So Caroline needed to be more understanding and know that her mother did love her.

She wasn't sure if she would ever understand. Maybe when she was older, but not now. All Caroline wanted was for her mother to relax and let her have a bit of fun. There was nothing wrong with that, was there?

Marie led the way off the estate and into the fields just beyond the boundaries of their home. Caroline grumbled as she followed her. She didn't mind a walk, but Marie was one of those people who liked to walk a lot. She may not be someone who could run, but once she got going, she could walk for miles. Caroline had no idea how she did it. Her feet were certainly hurting after a short time, and Marie didn't seem to notice. She simply said it was good exercise.

Caroline wasn't sure about that. She liked to have use of her feet without wincing.

The fields sloped down to a stream, which seemed to have got bigger during the rain. The banks were wider and muddier than Caroline remembered, and she could see two boys playing with wooden boats. They were hopping from stone to stone in the middle of the stream, snatching up their boats before they went too far and then running back up to start again. Even from her distance, she could see they were rather muddy.

But they looked like they were having a lot of fun.

"Marie, look!" Caroline hurried up to her maid and pointed. "Those two boys down at the river. Can we go and play with them?"

"I think it's best we stay over here, Lady Caroline. You shouldn't be associating with boys."

Caroline snorted.

"Oh, stop it! What's going to happen? They're just boys!"

"Caroline ..."

But Caroline wasn't listening because she was already running down the slope to the stream. The boys turned and watched her approach.

They looked to be about her age, with black hair and thin frames. They could have been twins. Caroline felt a shot of excitement. She rarely got the chance to play with children her age.

Her cousins on her mother's side were older than she was, and they weren't very nice. Her cousins on her father's side lived in Scotland, and Caroline had only seen them once when she was barely walking. And her mother closely supervised her with other children. It was very boring.

This was going to be a fun day, after all.

"Hello!" she called, slowing to a stop at the edge of the bank.

The boy closest to her gave her a curious look and nodded once. The other boy, standing on a stone in the middle of the stream, arched an eyebrow at her approach.

"What do you want, young miss?"

"Can I join in with whatever you're doing?"

The first boy frowned.

"It's best that you don't."

“What?” Caroline pouted. “Why not?”

“Yes, Henry.” The second boy gave his brother – they had to be brothers, they looked that similar – a pointed look. “Why not?”

Henry’s cheeks went pink.

“Because it’s very slippery and muddy here. We’re already going to be in enough trouble with our parents, and I don’t think you want to be in trouble for getting your dress covered in mud. It’s not very ladylike.”

Caroline huffed.

“How about you let me worry about that? I just want to play.”

“Oh, let her play, Henry.” Henry’s brother hopped off the stone and wobbled in the mud, keeping upright. “Don’t be such a spoilsport.”

Henry shook his head.

“We talked about this, James.”

“About what? If she wants to play with us, let her play.” James grinned at Caroline. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Caroline had already decided that he was the nice brother. She liked him. Henry was still looking unhappy.

“Mother and Father won’t be happy.”

“Who’s going to tell them?” James held out a hand to Caroline. “Ignore my brother. He’s a spoilsport. Come on, let’s play!”

#

Caroline’s head felt like it was about to split open. The pain just would not go away. Clutching onto Marie, she wailed as she was led home, stumbling as her feet refused to keep her upright. She felt like she was going to be sick, and her head ... it hurt so much.

Why did that boy have to do that? Why did he think it was amusing to tackle her into the stream? One moment, she had been hopping from stone to stone, quite happily, and the next, she was flying off and landing facedown in the stream. For a brief second, she thought she was going to drown. Her nose still hurt from the water she managed to snort in, and her throat felt raw.

Then she was aware of the pain in her head. She must have hit a rock, and it was sharp. It felt like she had been stabbed in the forehead.

Marie didn’t say anything, although the tight grip on her was enough to tell Caroline that her maid-governess was frightened. Neither of them had seen that much blood before. Caroline could feel it dripping

over her eye and down her cheek with the water.

What was her mother going to say?

Marie ushered Caroline into the house, still holding the child upright.

“McFarlane! Winfield! I need help, quickly!”

Two of the servants hurried down the hall, both of them going straight to Caroline as she buckled to her knees.

“Get Lady Caroline up to her bedroom immediately.” Marie’s voice shook as she shrugged off her coat. “Have Mrs Mayfield get a bath prepared for her. And Philip needs to go for Dr Preston.”

“What about Lady Bingham?” McFarlane asked as he lifted Caroline into his arms. “Who’s going to tell her?”

“I’ll tell her.” Marie flapped her hands at the footman. “Just go! Quickly!”

Caroline’s head was spinning far too much. She could barely understand what was going on. The spinning was making her feel sick. It wouldn’t make much difference if she closed her eyes for just a moment, just until it felt like she wasn’t going to empty the contents of her stomach over McFarlane.

When she came around again, something was shaking her by the shoulders and slapping her face. That hurt almost as much as the pain in her head, which was throbbing like mad. Caroline moaned and tried to roll away, but someone kept her head still.

“Caroline! Caroline, wake up!”

Was that her mother? Caroline opened her eyes to see Lady Bingham leaning over her, her face pale as she sat on the edge of the bed. She brushed her daughter’s hair out of her eyes.

“Darling, you scared us when you passed out like that!”

“My head hurts.” Caroline burst into tears. “It really hurts, Mother.”

“Oh, Caroline.” Lady Bingham shook her head. “You really shouldn’t be so boisterous when you play. It’s no surprise you got hurt.”

“I didn’t ask to get tackled into the river, Mother!” Caroline wailed. “That boy really hurt me!”

“Do you know which boy it was?”

“I ... I don’t. They looked very similar.” Caroline tried to concentrate, but she had no idea which boy had attacked her. “They could have been twins, James and Henry.”

That was when Lady Bingham froze. Her face went even paler.

“Oh, dear.”

“What?” Caroline swiped at her face, whimpering when she saw the blood on her hand. “What is it?”

“It’s nothing.” Lady Bingham urged her daughter to sit up. “Nothing at all. Your bath is ready now, Caroline. Let’s get you cleaned up and into bed. Dr Preston will be here soon, and we don’t want you to catch your death of cold.”

Caroline felt too woozy to do anything except allow her mother to lead her over to the bed and to the tin bath by the fire. Lady Bingham stripped her down and got her into the bath, bathing her with a gentleness that Caroline would have found surprising if she wasn’t in so much pain. Her mother was nothing like this, but she wasn’t about to argue. She just wanted someone to hold her and tell her that things were going to be all right again.

It was horrible what had happened. All Caroline had wanted to do was to play with children near her own age. There was nothing wrong with that, was there? Apparently, the two boys hadn’t thought so. Or one of them. James had been nice enough, but Henry had been apprehensive. Had he been the one to attack her? Or had James pretended to be nice and then tackled her?

Were they messing around? Caroline wanted to think so, but if it was a bit of fun, why did the two boys look furtive? They had backed away pretty quickly when Caroline crawled out of the stream, soaking

wet, muddy, and bleeding from the head. They had both looked guilty.

Why would anyone do that? It wasn't amusing at all. And Caroline felt sick that she had been a part of it.

She was still feeling odd once her bath was finished and she was being put into her nightgown before Lady Bingham and Marie put her back into bed. Caroline wasn't aware of much, but she knew that she kept asking for her father. He would be back later today, wouldn't he? She wanted her father to be there, to hold her and make her feel better.

Marie stayed at her side as Lady Bingham went to greet the physician, who bandaged her head. He pulled the cloth around her so tightly that Caroline felt like her head was being squeezed even more. At least she wouldn't need a needle to be stuck into her head for stitches. That was something. But it didn't make Caroline feel any better.

She slipped in and out of sleep throughout the rest of the day. Dr Preston had told her to stay in bed for at least a week to recover, and that sounded like a good idea. Caroline didn't think she could get up without being sick. She was aware of people sitting at her bedside, but she was so drowsy that she wasn't sure who was there. It was all a big blur.

When Caroline managed to open her eyes without everything hurting, it was dark, and the candles were lit. The fire was burning brightly in the grate, warming up the room. It felt really nice, and Caroline was actually feeling warm for the first time that day. She felt like she had been shivering all day.

A person was sitting in a chair by the fire, long legs stretched out as

they stared into the fire. He had removed his jacket, and his cravat was undone, his hair standing up on end as he unbuttoned his waistcoat. Even with the shadows across his face, Caroline could see the worry in his face.

It took a moment longer for her to realise that it was the person she had been hoping for all day. Caroline started to sit up.

“Papa!”

Lewis Folton, Lord Bingham, looked up. He got to his feet and hurried over to the bed.

“Careful, Caroline. I don’t want you to hurt your head again.”

“I don’t care,” Caroline declared. She sat up and flung her arms around her father’s neck as he sat on the bed. “You’re here.”

“Yes. I’m here.”

Bingham hugged her gently, rubbing his daughter’s back as she buried her face into his neck. Caroline couldn’t help herself, and she started sobbing. It felt like such a relief to have her father back. He seemed to spend so much time in London, and she didn’t get to see him so much. She had begged so many times to go with him, but Bingham had said it wasn’t the place for young children. Caroline hadn’t liked that, but her father came home as much as he could, just to spend time with his daughter.

If only he had been home earlier. Then Caroline might not have gone off and got hurt by those horrible boys.

“I missed you, Papa.” Caroline sniffed hard and pulled back to wipe her nose on her sleeve. “I really missed you.”

“I missed you, too, darling.” Bingham cupped her chin and inspected her. “You still look pale. I was told it was a bad fall.”

“It was.” Caroline swallowed. “These boys, James and Henry, were letting me play with them. Then one of them tackled me, and I ... I hit my head.” She touched the bandage and winced. “It still hurts.”

“I can imagine.” Bingham frowned. “You said, James and Henry?”

“Yes. Mother wouldn’t say who they were, but she didn’t look happy.”

Bingham sighed.

“If they’re who I think they are, that was James and Henry Beaufort you met. The Duke of Cornwall’s sons.”

Caroline stared.

“They’re sons of a duke?”

“Yes. The Duke and Duchess are nice people, and their younger son James is a decent boy. But Henry, the older lad ...” Bingham shook his head. “People are talking about how he’s a bit of a troublemaker. Whenever something bad happens, it always seems to happen when he’s around.”

Caroline could remember Henry clearly now. He was the one who kept his distance while James was playing with Caroline. It was like he wasn’t keen on being around her.

“Do you know if it was him who hurt you?” Bingham asked.

“I don’t know, Papa. They looked similar. I wouldn’t be able to tell them apart.”

“That’s hardly surprising. Henry and James are only eleven months apart, and they’re very close.”

Caroline’s head was pounding even more from the talking. She could barely keep her eyes open.

“Why would he think it’s all right to hurt people, Papa?”

“For all we know, it wasn’t Henry. It could have been James.”

“Why do you say that? Of course it was Henry!”

“Until we know for sure, don’t assume it was him. False accusations, even at your age now, will damage someone for the rest of their lives.” Bingham cupped her jaw. “The best thing for you to do, Caroline, is to get some rest. Get better.”

“Can you stay with me? I don’t want to be alone.”

Bingham’s expression softened.

“Of course.”

Kicking off his pumps, Bingham climbed up onto the bed and lay down, tucking Caroline into his side. She laid her head on his arm and cuddled up to her father. This was the first time all day that she actually felt comfortable. Having her father around was actually calming.

She closed her eyes and allowed sleep to claim her again.

Chapter 2

1813

Caroline headed downstairs in a good mood. Her lessons had gone better than she expected, and Marie had been very pleased with her progress. Now she had had her lunch, she had the afternoon to herself, and Caroline planned to make the most of it. It was such a beautiful day, and she was looking forward to going out on her horse for a long ride out in the countryside.

Her parents were in the morning room having tea when Caroline found them. Bingham looked up from his newspaper and smiled at his daughter.

“Yes, Caroline?”

“I’m just going out on Midnight, Father.”

“All right, dear.” Her father went back to his newspaper. “Just take care while you’re out.”

“Of course.”

Sitting across from her husband, Lady Bingham gave her daughter a disapproving frown.

“You’re going out riding again? This is the fourth time this week.”

“What’s wrong with that, Mother? You’re always telling me that I need to get out into the fresh air, so I’m taking your advice.”

“It’s not very ladylike doing it so much.”

Bingham sighed.

“Oh, stop it, Ann. Caroline’s right, you were the one who told her to go out more, and she enjoys it. She’s not going out and getting into trouble.”

“Not anymore.” Lady Bingham muttered.

Caroline could hear her across the room, and she bit back a sigh. Her mother was always under the impression that she was going to get hurt. It was the reason that one of the servants had to come out with her to make sure she didn’t fall off her horse and injure herself. Caroline felt like she wasn’t able to relax properly. How was she meant to get into trouble when she had a chaperone?

Bingham shook his head at his wife and turned to Caroline.

“Go and saddle Midnight, darling. I’ll make sure Stevens is out there once you’re ready. He needs to get out as well.”

“Yes, Father.”

At least she would be able to have a bit of enjoyment with Stevens. The footman wasn't keen on horses, but he was good company. Lady Bingham was constantly complaining about her daughter being on such good terms with the servants to the point that she talked to them like they were old friends, but Caroline argued back that she barely had any friends, and the servants were practically family. Her mother simply sniffed, not happy that her daughter had spoken back to her. The children of her mother's friends weren't Caroline's friends. Not when they were pushed together.

She had been keeping a closer eye on her since her accident five years before. It wasn't her fault that she had been knocked over by Henry Beaufort and cut her head open. It wasn't her fault that he liked to cause trouble. And yet Lady Bingham had started getting overprotective. It had taken almost a month before Caroline was allowed to go further than the immediate garden with her mother watching her. That had been frustrating when Caroline liked to go exploring.

She understood Lady Bingham's concerns, but it didn't make her feel any better.

Caroline absently rubbed the scar on her forehead. Dr Preston had said that she wouldn't be left with a scar, and she wouldn't need stitches. But he had been wrong on both counts. After a week, her wound was still not mending as the physician would have liked, so she had had to sit through having a needle shoved into her skin to close the wound. Now she had a thick scar on her forehead. It was near enough to the hairline that she could arrange her hair to hide most of it, but Caroline was very much aware of it. It felt like it itched.

That was another reason she didn't have many friends; her mother thought the scar made her look ugly. Caroline didn't think so, but her insecurities had been coming into play recently. She wanted to be a normal girl with her friends, go out and meet people, but the scar had her getting worried.

She would be having her first Season in London in a couple of years, and Caroline knew she would be uncomfortable about her scar. Who would want a woman who was flawed as a wife? But her father had said the right man wouldn't care about that as long as she proved her love and devotion to him. That would be enough for them. Caroline could only hope that he was right.

Changing into her riding clothes, Caroline hurried back downstairs and out to the stables. Midnight was already saddled up, and Stevens was holding onto the reins of Midnight and one of the horses he borrowed whenever he had to go with her. He looked very uncomfortable, giving Caroline a brisk nod.

"Are you ready to go, Lady Caroline?"

"Yes, Stevens." Caroline grinned as Stevens gave the two horses a wary look.

"Nice to see you're ready to come out with me."

"Lady Bingham called me in and said I needed to be the one to go with you." Stevens flinched when his horse nudged his shoulder with its nose. "She refused to listen to my protests that I'm not good on horses."

Caroline knew why her mother had chosen the large footman. He was far bigger than her, bigger than most men. Caroline had no idea men could be this tall. Apparently, he was intimidating, and Caroline needed that when she was out. She didn't think so, but there was no arguing with her mother.

For now.

"Well," Caroline took Midnight's reins and climbed into the saddle, "if you have to come along, you'd better keep up with me."

"Lady Caroline, I don't think ..."

But Caroline had kicked Midnight into motion before the footman could finish. She galloped away, heading down the slope towards the main gate. There was the sound of another horse galloping behind her, and she looked over her shoulder to see Stevens clinging onto his horse for dear life as it started at a gallop that looked like he would careen out of the saddle. Caroline paused for a moment, wondering if she should wait for him and make sure he wouldn't go flying, but the urge to go riding as fast as she could with little supervision was tempting.

So, she urged Midnight to gallop faster and headed down the hill towards the stream. This place had left a lot of bad memories for her, and it had taken a while before Caroline could come down here without going into a panic about the memories. It still made her shudder, but things weren't as bad as before.

Henry Beaufort had a lot to answer for. Caroline hated him for what he had done. He couldn't think that what he had done was amusing. Even if he finally apologised now, Caroline wouldn't be able to forgive him. He had pushed it too far, and all on the first meeting.

She hated him.

Midnight slowed so she could jump the river, which she did with ease. Caroline was urging her to head up the gentle incline when a loud bang rang out. Something in the air rippled near her face, and Caroline cried out. That set Midnight off, and she neighed loudly, rising onto her hind legs. Caroline tried to keep a hold on the reins, but the surprise move made her lose her grip, and she was falling.

The air was knocked out of her lungs as she hit the ground, and then she was rolling so fast her head was spinning. Suddenly, Caroline stopped, and the world tilted so fast she wanted to be sick. She was in the stream, lying in the shallows. It hadn't been raining lately, so it wasn't as deep as it could have been, but she could feel the water seeping through her dress.

She lay where she was for a moment. What had just happened? Had someone just shot at her?

Oh, God. Someone had shot at her.

There was the sound of running feet, and then Caroline was aware of someone rolling her over. Her vision cleared, and she realised someone was leaning over her. It was a boy – a young man – with black hair and eyes so blue they were like gems. He looked concerned, brushing her wet hair off her forehead.

“Are you all right?”

It took a moment for Caroline to realise who was leaning over her. She recognised those blue eyes. Henry Beaufort.

“Please, answer me,” Henry begged. “I heard a gunshot, and then I saw you on the ground. Please tell me you didn’t get hurt.”

Gunshot. So, someone had shot at her. She hadn’t imagined it. Then Caroline saw the pistol tucked into Henry’s waistband. Oh, God. Had he shot at her?

“Come on.” Henry took her arm. “Let’s get you to your feet.”

“No!” Caroline pulled away. “I can do it myself.”

“You’ve just fallen off your horse.”

“And I’m fine on my own.”

Caroline rolled away, which had her going further into the stream, and she slowly got to her feet. Her whole body hurt, and her knee was throbbing. She tried to put her weight onto that leg, and it screamed at her. Flinching, she staggered and did her best to keep upright. Henry reached for her, but Caroline swung at him.

“Keep away from me!”

“What?” Henry stopped, looking bewildered. “I’m just trying to help you.”

“Just trying to help.” Caroline snorted. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you shot at me yourself.”

“Why would I do that?”

“I don’t know. Why would you cut my head open five years ago?” Caroline gestured at her head. “I’ve still got the scar.”

For a moment, Henry didn’t say anything. Then he swallowed and held out a hand.

“At least let’s get you out of the water. I don’t know who it was who shot at you, but it wasn’t me.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Henry grunted.

“I can tell. You’re just like everyone else. At this point, I could be in

another country, and I would still get blamed.”

“Being in another country would do everyone a favour,” Caroline snapped.

Something passed across Henry’s face. He looked hurt. Why would he be hurt over something he knew to be true? Everyone would be happier if he just left. Being the heir to a duke didn’t mean he had the privilege of being who he was.

Midnight whinnied. She had trotted back to the stream, stepping into the water and nudging Caroline with her nose. Keeping her eyes on Henry, Caroline fumbled for the reins, getting them on the second try. Then she heard someone shouting and turned to see Stevens. He had finally joined them. His eyes were wide as he stared at her.

“Lady Caroline! I saw you fall. What ...?”

“I want to go home, Stevens.” Caroline limped out of the river, tugging Midnight with her. “I think I’m going to need a change of clothes.”

“She’s cut her hand as well,” Henry added. “It’s going to need to be cleaned.”

Her hand? Caroline looked down and saw the blood dripping from her palm. There was a big gash near her thumb. Another thing she could say Henry had given her. Wincing from the pain that was now making an appearance, Caroline managed to get into the saddle.

“What happened?” Stevens asked, his eyes searching her face. “You were just riding, and then you were falling. What happened?”

“Ask him.” Caroline jerked her head at Henry. “He’s good at spinning stories.”

Before Henry could say anything, she turned her horse and headed back up towards the road. Her previous good mood was gone now. She didn’t want to go riding anymore. Henry had taken that away from her.

Her mother said she was always getting into trouble. That wasn’t strictly true. If Henry Beaufort was around, Caroline just ended up getting dragged into trouble.

The boy was more trouble than he was worth. And Caroline hated it.

#

Henry watched Caroline go, a mixture of frustration and concern bubbling in his gut. He felt awful that she had been hurt again, and he didn’t like seeing people get hurt, but she immediately thought it was him. She refused to let him near her because she believed he was the one who shot at her.

Just like everyone else, Caroline Folton believed that Henry was the bad one. He was the boy who caused trouble and had no remorse about it. His parents were in despair that Henry wouldn’t own up to

his mistakes. He had done so when they were children, but in the last five years, that had changed. Now Henry refused to take responsibility.

How could he when it wasn't his fault?

The servant was looking at Henry curiously, apprehension flickering in his eyes.

“What happened, Master Beaufort?”

Henry sighed and turned away.

“It doesn't matter what I say; you're not going to believe me. I'm not going to waste my breath. Just ...” He hesitated. “Just make sure she gets home and is looked after.”

“I plan to, Master Beaufort.” The servant awkwardly turned the horse around. “Maybe you should make yourself scarce. I'm sure Lord Bingham isn't going to be happy when he hears what his daughter has to say.”

Henry didn't need to be told twice. Lord Bingham was a nice gentleman, and he was actually kind to Henry, which was startling. Everyone else kept him at arm's length, but Lord Bingham made a point of talking to him if they crossed paths. Perhaps he saw Henry differently from everyone else.

He certainly wouldn't once he heard what had happened to his daughter. Caroline would be adamant that Henry had shot at her. Yes, he was carrying a pistol, but he would never shoot anyone. Certainly not Caroline Folton.

James had a lot to answer for. Including blackening Henry's name before he even had a chance to build himself up.

His brother was leaning against a tree as Henry stalked back to the path. He was checking the pistol, a strong smell of gunpowder in the air.

"What happened? Is Lady Caroline all right?"

"She cut her hand open, and that's another dress ruined for her." Henry glared at James. "Are you out of your mind? Why did you shoot at her? Amusement?"

James shrugged.

"I was aiming for a pheasant. She got in the way."

"There were no pheasants there, and you know it! You could have hit her!"

"But I didn't. She'll live."

Henry had thought he had got used to James' relaxed attitude when things went wrong. He just seemed to have no remorse for anything. As long as he got some fun out of it, that was fine.

"She'll live," he repeated with a snort. "Like she did when you tackled her into the stream and almost killed her five years ago?"

"She didn't die, did she?"

"I saw the cut on her head, James! That scar is going to be with her permanently because you thought it would be funny to knock her over."

James pushed off the tree and tucked his pistol into the belt on his trousers.

"Then maybe she shouldn't play with people she doesn't know. You never know what riff-raff you're going to come across."

Henry stared at him. How could James think almost killing another child was all right?

"You're awful, do you know that? What you do is just disgusting." He followed James as his brother turned and walked away. "You're lucky Caroline hasn't caused a stink about it."

"She would still blame you. She believed it was you last time."

“Only because people assumed that it was me.”

James sniggered.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have covered for me the first time.”

Henry gritted his teeth. When James first started doing what he called mischief, Henry had started defending him, taking responsibility for his actions. James wasn’t good when it came to discipline, and while the duke and duchess were fair people, their governess had been a strict disciplinarian and used the cane. James hated the cane, so Henry had done what any brother would have done and said it was him. Anything to protect his little brother.

Unfortunately, after doing it for a year, nobody believed that Henry was a good boy. They saw him as the troublemaker, the one who liked to be horrible to people for no reason other than for a source of amusement. Henry didn’t find it amusing at all. It horrified him that James would do this. How were they brothers when James behaved like this? It was despicable, but because everyone believed without any proof that Henry was the culprit, he had no choice but to simply take the title of the bad child. And James loved it.

He really needed to stop hanging around with James. But James was sneaky. He never did anything wrong when Henry wasn’t around, and their parents told the two to play together so James could keep Henry in check.

His brother thought this was hilarious. Henry just felt nauseous.

“I helped you because I was your brother, James.” Henry darted in front of James, causing the other boy to stop. “It was meant to be a one-time occasion. But then you kept asking again and again. I did it because I love you. But now, it doesn’t matter what happens; you’ve decided to say it was me all the time. Now look at what’s happening!”

“You could just say something.” James shrugged. “You are the heir to the dukedom, after all.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“I ... I don’t know, actually.”

Henry growled, shoving his brother in the chest.

“You’re going to get me into serious trouble, James! Shooting at girls? Really?”

“No one’s getting hurt.”

“Caroline Folton got hurt! Twice!” Henry gestured with two fingers. “And she’s going to blame me!”

James snorted.

“She needs a sense of humour. And you shouldn’t be concerned about what she thinks.” He stepped around Henry. “Come on; let’s go home. This is boring me now.”

“Because there’s no one else to shoot?” Henry snapped. “Why don’t you shoot me? You seem to find that the best thing to do today!”

“Where’s the fun in shooting you?” James waved a hand carelessly as he walked. “Who will take responsibility for my actions, then?”

He did have a point. Henry was the convenient scapegoat. He would be blamed for everything. Then again, James could shoot Henry in cold blood and still get away with it.

It was just not fair.

His anger boiling, Henry followed his brother home. As he went, he couldn’t help thinking about Caroline. Was she all right? She wouldn’t need stitches for her hand, would she? Or would she get another scar on her like the one on her head?

It had taken Henry a moment to recognise her when he first came running over. Then again, there were very few girls with fiery red hair in the area. And probably even less who had that many freckles. Caroline had looked like a very awkward child five years ago. Chubby with wild hair done up but coming out of whatever style she had been put in that morning. But her green eyes had just sparkled. That was what got Henry’s attention to start with. Her eyes were stunning.

He had got a closer look at them earlier, and they had left him momentarily speechless. They seemed to be a darker green, like emeralds. Her hair was less wild, straight, and a gorgeous dark red. Even her freckles made her look attractive. Henry hadn't thought a girl attractive before, so it had left him a little bewildered. Where had that come from?

That disappeared when Caroline started accusing him of shooting her. Henry would never have done that, but he knew that he wouldn't be believed. She was adamant that he was the bad one, so it had to be him. Chances were, she was at home telling her parents that Henry had tried to kill her. The story would be embellished, he was sure, but Henry would come out of this looking like the one who had a serious problem.

Once his parents heard about this, he was sure they would send him away. Maybe even disinherit him and give the title of heir to James. Deep down, Henry wished they would do that. All he wanted was for people to believe that he wasn't a bad person.

They reached their home, and Henry headed straight for the staircase as soon as he handed his pistol to the butler. He was almost halfway up the stairs when the door to the drawing room opened, and the Duchess of Cornwall came into the foyer. She looked surprised at the presence of both her children.

"Henry? James? I thought you two were going to be out for longer. Did you catch a pheasant that quickly?"

"No, Mother." James sighed and gestured at Henry. "Henry decided we should come back after he hurt someone."

“What?” Lady Cornwall’s eyes widened as she stared at her eldest son.
“Henry, really?”

Henry glared at James, who was smirking.

“I didn’t do anything, Mother!”

“You always say that.”

“It’s true. James was the one who ...”

“Don’t.” His mother raised a hand. “I don’t want to hear it. You always try to pin the blame on your brother. Why can’t you accept responsibility for once in your life?”

Henry bristled.

“I’d accept responsibility if I actually did anything, Mother. And I didn’t shoot anyone.”

From the look on his mother’s face, she wasn’t going to believe him at all. That hurt Henry to know that his own parents were never on his side. They saw James as the good boy, the one who had to hang around Henry to make sure he didn’t get into trouble. If they knew the truth ...

But they don't want to know the truth. They believe what they want to believe.

“Go to your room and stay there, Henry,” Lady Cornwall ordered sharply. I’m going to talk to your father as soon as he returns. Maybe it’s time we actually put you into the navy as we’ve been planning for some time. That should straighten you out.”

“Mother!”

“Don’t take that tone with me! You’ve been nothing but trouble for years, and now you’re starting to shoot at people?” The duchess turned away. “You need someone to get you on the right path. James can’t do it all the time. Now go to your room and wait there until I’ve spoken with your father.”

“But ...”

“Not another word!”

Lady Cornwall disappeared, and James snigged from his place at the bottom of the stairs. Henry scowled.

“Why don’t you tell her the truth?”

“She’ll just think I’m trying to get you out of trouble.”

“Which you would be!” Henry snapped. “You’re going to let them send me away while you get to terrorise our neighbours?”

“I’m not going to do that.” James winked. “Because I don’t. Not when my brother Henry’s around.”

Henry snarled and slapped his hand against the wall before storming up the stairs. Not for the first time, he regretted protecting his brother from trouble when they were young. James did not deserve his loyalty.

He certainly never got any in return.

Chapter 3

1818

Caroline cast her eye over the dresses laid out in the shop. They were all very lovely, exquisitely made. She could never take her eyes off them whenever she walked by. Her mother said she was like a magpie attracted to shiny objects whenever she was near a dress shop. Caroline just loved clothes. She liked to think she was up to date with the latest fashions, although it did drive her father to despair with the amount of money he ended up spending on her every few months.

He didn't complain too much, so that was something. And he wouldn't mind if she got a new dress for the first ball of the Season, surely?

A dress caught her eye at the end of the rack, and Caroline found herself drifting towards it. It was a dark green, darker than she thought possible. She reached out and brushed her fingers over the fabric. It was silky smooth. Caroline did like silk.

"Oh, that's such a charming dress!"

Caroline looked up as a dark-haired woman her age came to join her, her eyes on the dress.

"Do you think this will be good for the ball tonight, Sarah?"

“I think it would be perfect,” Sarah Marcus, Lady Lakeford, declared. “you’re doing what I do when I’m not sure on selecting a dress.”

“What’s that?”

“When in doubt, go for the colour that matches your eyes.” Sarah nodded approvingly. “And this would be perfect for you.”

“Really?” Caroline peered closer at the dress. “I didn’t think my eyes were that green, though.”

Sarah laughed.

“You really need to take a closer look.” She squeezed her friend’s hand. “You have the most stunning eyes in all of Society.”

Caroline couldn’t help smiling at Sarah’s enthusiasm. Ever since meeting at their first ball the previous year, the two of them had been practically inseparable. Caroline was glad for Sarah’s warm, down-to-earth attitude, and Sarah also matched her love for the classics. They could sit for hours talking about the same topic and never get bored.

It drove both of their mothers to despair as they were supposed to be finding husbands, not sitting in corners talking about Greek tragedies. When they were doing something as daunting as heading into Society, Caroline felt having a friend at her side was preferable to being alone.

“You are such a flatterer, Sarah,” she said as she signalled for a shop

assistant to join them. "I'd like to buy this dress. You should have my measurements."

"Yes, Lady Caroline." The assistant picked up the dress. "I'll take it back for Mrs Maisieley to start working on it."

"Thank you."

The assistant walked away, and Sarah turned to Caroline.

"Well, someone needs to tell you when you have good qualities. From the way you've been lately, you need a bit of a boost with your confidence."

"I suppose."

Sarah did have a point. It was going to be their second Season. Caroline had just turned nineteen, and there was no sign of a potential husband. Neither of them had taken their first Season too seriously, choosing to spend time with people. Caroline knew she had done a lot of flirting and might have embarrassed herself a little by her carefree nature, but she had wanted to enjoy her first Season.

Get to know what Society was really like, and then think about finding her husband. Lady Bingham didn't like the fact her daughter had decided it this way, but Caroline had argued she needed to know who would be right for her. She didn't want to go into a marriage when she barely knew her husband and find them incompatible. If she was going to marry, she needed to know that she would be able to spend the rest of her life with someone she could stand.

There was also another reason why Caroline was reluctant to find a husband. She had seen it in the gentlemen's eyes whenever she was interacting with them. They kept staring at her forehead, at the scar that was very prominent. When she had been younger, Caroline had been able to hide it if she put her hair in a certain way, but keeping up with the latest fashions meant her hair had to be done in a particular style.

And that meant her scar, which was thick and white, was on display. A couple of younger gentlemen had commented on it and said that it made her unattractive, which had caused Caroline to be short with them. She had the misfortune to be scarred in such a manner, but it was not her fault.

Sarah had the problem that gentlemen didn't care for her looks. By her own admission, she was plainer than Caroline, so she wasn't considered aesthetically pleasing by modern standards. Which was not very kind, but Sarah took it in her stride.

She said if they couldn't accept her for who she was, those people weren't worth her time. Caroline liked that mentality, although it did mean her mother was pushing her more and more to get married. Her father didn't mind as long as Caroline was happy, but Lady Bingham was getting more pushy about it.

It was their second Season, and it felt like there was a lot more pressure on her to settle down. Mostly from her mother.

"I don't know why people want us to marry so young when we're barely into womanhood," Sarah said with a shake of her head. "My mother didn't marry until she was six-and-twenty, and she's now a

mother of five. It's entirely possible to get to an age that is considered too old and still have children. We don't wither and die past twenty."

Caroline smiled.

"I'm sure your grandparents weren't happy with the fact that your mother married later than everyone else."

"They still grumble about it now." Sarah shrugged. "I told them that it wasn't a problem if we're not married to the first man who looks at us, but they saw it as our fault. Grandmother, especially. She's told me not to visit until I have a husband and can conduct myself properly."

"Which means you're probably not going to visit them at all."

"Of course not! I'm not subjecting my husband to them."

Caroline laughed. She had met Sarah's grandparents when they came up for Christmas, and they had not been pleasant at all. They were shocked that they were almost nineteen years of age and not married. The grandmother had commented that she had expected Sarah to be married at seventeen when they had arranged a match for her, but even Sarah's parents had pushed back on it. They weren't too strict on Sarah's unmarried status, saying they would only step in if she wasn't married by her third Season. Caroline's father had said the same.

Which meant quite a bit of pressure on them before they were ready, which was irritating. But they couldn't carry on as they were forever. Something had to change.

“I’m glad they live in Cornwall,” Sarah said as they headed towards the counter and joined the queue of ladies waiting for their own dresses, “because that means I don’t have to see them often. They’re getting on, so I only see them once a year.”

“And you shouldn’t have to deal with them at Christmas.”

“It’s not so bad. I can escape when I want. They don’t like the snow.”

“I suppose.” Caroline absently rubbed the scar on her hand. Why did it always itch? “Father just wants me to be happy, although he will step in soon. But Mother thinks I need to get married immediately. I’ve had my first Season, and I should have had an offer by now.”

Well, you were feeling things out, getting used to it,” Sarah pointed out. “And you were very popular. Gentlemen flocked around you.”

“I didn’t get an offer of marriage.”

And Caroline didn’t see that happening when all they could do was stare at her scar. It was more of a hindrance than she realised. Lord Bingham said it wasn’t too much of a bother, and you could barely see it, but then Lady Bingham had to interject and say that she could. Which only resulted in Caroline being told that she should have been more careful as a child.

Caroline hated that reminder of what happened. It just made her hate for a certain person even worse.

She sorted out her dress and the measurements with Mrs Maisieley, putting it on her account. Then she and Sarah stepped out into the spring sunshine. Not as warm as it was supposed to be for the middle of April, but it was manageable. Sarah slipped her arm through Caroline's as they started walking.

"Don't fret so much, Caroline. It's going to be fine. Just carry on as normal. You'll have a lot of enjoyment this time, and you might even be lucky enough to find a man you can fall in love with."

"I'm not sure about that." Caroline sighed. "I heard from Mother that the Beaufort brothers are both home on leave. They're probably going to be there tonight."

Which meant she was going to be in the same room as the boy who had given her the scars and shot at her. Caroline wasn't looking forward to it at all. She didn't think she could keep her composure with Henry Beaufort around. Years might have passed, and he had been in the navy for the last four years, but that didn't mean he would have grown up and become a decent person.

Anyone who started being horrible that young never grew out of it.

"You're thinking about what happened to you again, aren't you?" Sarah asked.

"Why wouldn't I? He brings back so many bad memories."

Sarah knew about Henry. Caroline had told her everything, but this seemed to be a topic where they differed in opinion. While Sarah was sympathetic to her experiences, she seemed to be sympathetic towards Henry as well. Caroline was confused by that. He had hurt her and tried to kill her, and Sarah wasn't apoplectic towards him. That she couldn't understand.

"Henry could have grown up, Caroline," Sarah pointed out. "You do when you're in the navy and at war."

But Caroline shook her head.

"I don't think he has. You do know he did try to kill me."

"You don't know it was him who shot at you. And you don't know it was him who cut your head open."

"I know it was him." Caroline started rubbing her head again. The scar was really beginning to itch now, and her gloves weren't helping. "He's the troublemaker."

"Because everyone said so, and nobody chose to question it."

"You're saying I imagined it all?"

"Of course not." Sarah sighed. "Look, it was nine years ago, and you haven't seen each other in four. There's a good chance that things

have changed. If you're not comfortable around him, then keep your distance. That's all you need to do."

Caroline snorted.

"He'd better keep away from me. Because I won't be nice."

Two interactions with the person who had disfigured her for life was enough for Caroline to decide that she didn't want to be anywhere where Henry Beaufort was. If he had changed, she wasn't going to hang around to find out.

#

"Your jacket, Lord Bannock."

Henry looked around to see his valet standing by the bed, holding up his blue coat. He sighed and tugged at his cravat again.

"Do I really need to wear this thing, Christian? I feel like my air supply is being cut off. Reminds me of when I got caught in the rigging."

"I'm afraid you do need to wear it, Lord Bannock. Your father will not be impressed if you go underdressed."

“Underdressed? I feel like I’m overdressed. I mean, look at this.” He gestured at himself. “I feel like I’ve been sewn into this. It’s keeping me practically immobile. Why is it necessary to wear all this?”

Christian sighed. The servant looked bored.

“Lord Cornwall said you were to attend, and you have to dress accordingly. You may have done things very differently at sea, but you’re not on a ship right now.”

“Did he also tell you to scold me as well? You’re meant to know your place.”

“I think that’s something you could follow as well.”

Henry stared. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Servants did not talk back, not like this. But ever since he returned on leave – his first in years – the entire household had been rather hostile towards him. It was like they were expecting him to start acting out and causing trouble again.

It will happen. Now James knows that his scapegoat has come back.

He fixed Christian with a hard stare.

“I understand you’re not comfortable with me being here, Christian, and, if I’m honest, I don’t want to be here. But I have my orders to rest properly, so that’s what I’m doing. If you have a problem with being

near me, and you're going to speak to me in such a manner, I think I'll forgo a valet."

"Your father ..."

"My father, nothing!" Henry held up a hand. "I will not be talked to like that. I managed four years getting myself dressed. I think I can manage a couple of months without a valet."

For a moment, he thought Christian was going to argue and refuse to leave, but the older man put the coat down and bowed before walking out. Henry heaved a sigh and rubbed his hands over his face. He was going to have a word with his parents about how Christian had spoken to him. No matter what they believed he had done, he didn't deserve to be treated like a second-class citizen.

Then again, he doubted that his parents would do anything to change the situation. They hadn't expressed it, but he knew they were disappointed that he hadn't kept in contact over the last four years. He hadn't come home in all that time, and while he had taken the occasional day's leave when the ship was in dock, Henry had never taken extended leave.

He never felt the need to, especially when he knew that the moment he got home, James was going to cause trouble and make him the bad one again. It didn't matter if James was in London or fighting the French, he would figure out a way to make Henry look like he hadn't changed at all.

His mother had been close to tears when Henry finally turned up for his two months' leave. She thought he had died at sea and nobody had told her. Then there were a lot of questions about why Henry had

never returned, to which Henry had reminded her that he had been sent away as punishment over something he never did.

Why would he want to return when people already had such a low opinion of him? The only reason he was there at all was because he had been pretty much escorted off the ship and told to properly rest. His mother had been upset that he would take what they did to heart.

How could he not? Henry loved his parents, but he really did resent them. They never listened to him. James always got what he wanted. Because they believed he was the troublemaker, Henry was often an afterthought. He was the heir to the dukedom! How did that work?

Although he wasn't expecting that to last for much longer. Henry had overheard his father and uncle talking the day before. They were discussing disinheriting Henry and giving the dukedom to James. Something about James being a bold, brave hero who had always lived up to expectations. Nothing was said about the medals Henry had won for fighting at sea and risking his own life. It was like they paled in comparison to his younger brother's soldier heroics.

If he were honest, Henry would be relieved if he was disinherited. He didn't want a dukedom. Being at sea was preferable for him. He had worked his way up through the ranks, and the other sailors respected him. He had never got into trouble on a ship, mostly because he didn't want to swab the dirtiest parts of the ship or clean up after the surgeon during the battle. He never put a foot wrong and showed the person he really was, and he was accepted.

Yet he was on the cusp of being disinherited because his family still believed he would cause trouble and bring their family into further disrepute. If only they had listened to him before.

Now Henry would have to attend this ball with people knowing the rumours and believing them, along with his brother. James would have all the ladies fawning over him. His status as a soldier and the son of a duke made him well sought after. As long as Henry kept his distance, they could manage the evening without any mishaps.

Hopefully.

Shrugging into his coat, Henry checked himself in the mirror. Not too bad, if he did say so himself. He had filled out while at sea, his shoulders broader and his frame a bit more filled out. Hauling up rigging tended to change a man's body. He didn't look like he had turned twenty a few months ago.

Hopefully, he could restore some sort of reputation and get people to change their opinions of him. Then again, Henry had been back at his family home for the last three days, and the servants hadn't warmed to him again.

Maybe it was a tall ask.

Just seven weeks and four days to go.

Putting on his dancing pumps, Henry left his bedchamber and headed towards the stairs. The door across the room from his opened, and James stepped out. He certainly looked striking in his red coat, his beard now neatly trimmed and his hair cut to a more appropriate length than it had been that morning. He grinned at Henry.

“You scrub up pretty well, Henry. Looks like the navy boys really do know how to look smart.”

Henry bit back the retort he really wanted to give and fixed a bland smile on his face.

“You don’t look too bad yourself, James. Although you could be better without that beard.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it.” James rubbed his hand over his jaw. He looked like he was preening. “The ladies certainly like it.”

“Not all the ladies do. I know Mother doesn’t.”

“I’m a grown man, Henry. I can do what I want.”

“Within reason.”

James smirked. He adjusted his coat.

“Well, if there is an inheritance at the end of the day, I need to keep in line. Growing a beard is not going to disinherit me. Not like some people,” he added, giving Henry a pointed look.

Henry gritted his teeth.

“James, don’t.”

“What?”

“Just don’t. We’ve been through this. You’re a grown man now, and you’re not going to get into any more trouble. How you managed to get through life in the army without getting severely punished, I have no idea. But I’m not going to bail you out this time.”

“Hey, I’m not that bad anymore!”

“I hope not,” Henry muttered. He set off down the hall. “Aren’t we supposed to be leaving? We’re going to be late.”

“We’ll be there in plenty of time.” James fell into step beside him. “Do you think you’ll be meeting your future wife tonight?”

“Why are you even asking that?”

“I’m just curious.” James sniggered. “I’m sure you haven’t been with a woman since you’ve been at sea.”

“Don’t be crude, James.”

“Even sailors can get lonely.”

Henry growled and shot his brother a scowl.

“It’s none of your business what I did and didn’t get up to. It’s not like you would be any different. I doubt you were a saint while you were in France.”

“I was the epitome of sainthood.”

“You’re such a liar, James.”

“And I’m good at it.” James stroked his chin. “At least people can tell us apart with this beard. Although it was fun when people mixed us up so much as children.”

“I didn’t find it amusing.” Henry reached the top of the stairs. “You got away with far too much.”

“Well, you didn’t do the brotherly thing and keep me out of trouble.”

Henry stared at him.

“I did. The first time. But by the time I realised I shouldn’t be doing that, it was too late, and nobody believed me. It was to my own detriment.”

“And now you’re close to being disinherited.” James sighed. “Even your medals at sea haven’t helped.”

Henry didn’t want to talk about that. He had served at the Bombardment of Algiers and the Battle of Mahidpur, gaining high recognition in both, and yet his parents didn’t comment on them. They knew he had received medals – something like that couldn’t be kept quiet in Society – and yet they never talked about them. Henry had no idea if his parents were proud of him.

He turned away and headed down the stairs. The sooner he left, the better. Just seven weeks and four days.

And that felt like too long.

Chapter 4

Caroline's good mood at going to her first ball of the Season had been slowly ebbing away for the last twenty minutes. Things had started off well when she and Sarah had arrived, and people were milling around quite happily. They were very well received, especially Caroline. She did notice that everyone was focusing more on her than Sarah, and it was not equal, but Sarah didn't seem to mind. She seemed happy enough to step back and let things work out naturally.

But after an hour, after going around the room and taking a drink from a tray, Caroline realised that the gentlemen had pretty much vanished. Apart from the occasional older man, the only men in the ballroom and dining room were the servants. Everyone else had gone. That was confusing. Where could they have gone? Then Caroline had been told that the host wasn't too keen on big social gatherings and liked to hide away in another room to play cards and that the male guests always gravitated towards him. No women permitted.

Caroline thought that was incredibly rude. She liked a game of cards, and she liked to think she was good at it. But women were not allowed to go into the room, so she had to wait in the ballroom with the other ladies, wondering when they would come out. Even her father had snuck in there. Bingham had promised to escort her and Sarah tonight, and now he had vanished. Lady Bingham wasn't going to be too impressed when she came back from visiting her sister and her family in Sussex.

Things were getting a little boring. Caroline always thought having gentlemen around livened a party up. They made things more interesting, the conversations more diverse. And the harmless flirtations certainly couldn't be done with another woman, not without getting strange looks.

From the way the hostess was moving around the room, she didn't appear to have noticed that her husband and half the guests had gone. She was beaming and chatting away with everyone like nothing was happening.

It was strange. Caroline didn't think she could cope like that when she got married. If she got married. Her future husband would not be leaving her to host on her own, not like this.

Not your relationship, not your business. Leave it be.

"Oh, dear." Sarah sighed. "This doesn't appear to be going very well."

Caroline snorted.

"That's a bit of an understatement, Sarah. I want to dance, and I can't really dance with another woman."

Sarah giggled.

"You could, but that would cause a bit of a stir."

The image of the two of them dancing to a tune designed for a man and a woman had Caroline giggling herself. She was so bored that she was tempted to actually do it. She had danced with Sarah when they were visiting before, just not out in public. And Sarah was a good dancer.

She really needed to stop thinking about doing something that would have everyone talking.

“You could just go into the room and ask someone if they want to dance,” Sarah suggested, but Caroline shook her head.

“I’m not that forward. And they have a footman on the door, so the ladies can’t go in.”

“Pity.” Sarah slipped her arm through her friend’s. “Come on, let’s go into the dining room and get something to eat. At least we can take the weight off our feet. My knees are beginning to hurt.”

That sounded like a good idea. Caroline hadn’t eaten much earlier, thinking she would eat at the ball. Now her stomach was growling, and she was worried people close by could hear it. They crossed the ballroom and into the dining room. There was a long line of tables at the far end of the room, laden down with a multitude of food. Caroline had seen it when she first came in and had been impressed. Despite the host’s behaviour, he and his wife knew how to keep their guests fed.

Picking up a plate, Caroline selected her food and then carried it across to a nearby table. Sarah joined her, settling down next to her with her own plate. Caroline tried not to laugh at the amount her friend had picked out.

“Are you sure you’ll be able to eat all that?”

“Of course.” Sarah winked. “You know I can eat anything.”

“But that much at a social gathering? Don’t you think that looks a little ... well ...”

“No, I don’t. There’s nobody in here, anyway, and I doubt the servants are going to say anything.” Sarah picked up a fork. “Needless to say, I might need to eat quickly before anyone does come in here.”

Caroline chuckled. Sarah did love her food. It was a wonder she had managed to keep her shape. Normally, in social situations, her friend was a bit more conservative. The fact that she had this much food had to mean she was trying to get rid of her own boredom.

They ate in silence. While they did, ladies came in and out of the dining hall, picking up their food and drifting around before leaving again. There were a few nods of greeting in Caroline and Sarah’s direction, but nobody came to talk to them. Caroline was glad they didn’t; she struggled with eating and talking at the same time. She felt like she constantly had to check that she didn’t have food stuck between her teeth.

“I must say,” Sarah said as she bit into a strawberry with a moan, “these are simply delicious.”

“I agree.” Caroline finished off her strawberry, dipping it into the cream she had put on the edge of her plate. “I love that we can still have strawberries at this time of year. I didn’t think they were in season yet.”

“According to Lady Ashburn, they are. Just. She has her own strawberry patch somewhere in the grounds.”

“How do you know?”

“She told me. Apparently, the strawberries start getting ripe about now, providing you tend to them correctly.”

It was the way she said it that had Caroline frowning at her.

“You’re not planning on sneaking out and getting a few strawberries, are you?”

Sarah bit her lip.

“Well ...”

“Sarah! We’re young ladies. We’re not poverty-stricken people or vagabonds.”

“We may be young ladies, but we are allowed to act out now and then.”

“Within reason.”

Sarah winked.

“And providing we don’t get caught.”

Caroline groaned. There were brief moments like this when she wondered why she and Sarah were friends. They liked to have fun and be a little wild occasionally, but stealing strawberries? Surely, they would get found out pretty quickly. Even in the dark, her red hair wasn’t easy to hide.

“Look, maybe this evening won’t be a complete failure,” Sarah said as she picked up her glass of water and took a sip. “The gentlemen will come out from hiding soon, and we’ll be able to do some dancing. And you can see if any young men want to go beyond flirting. I mean courtship,” she added hurriedly, “I don’t mean ...”

“I know what you meant.” Caroline sighed. “But I have a feeling that’s going to be a tough thing to deal with.”

“How so?”

“Sarah, gentlemen our age don’t want to settle down and get married. Not by choice. They want to have some fun and enjoy themselves. It’s like they want to remain little boys.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.” Sarah shrugged. “But, you know very well that women are far more mature than men. It’s our job to keep them

in line, even if they refuse to admit it.”

Normally, a comment like that would have Caroline giggling, but it just had her frowning.

“I don’t want to keep my husband in line. I want someone who is equal to me, who loves me and looks after me as much as I look after him.” Caroline rubbed her scar. Why did they always itch when she didn’t want them to? “I want a husband who loves me for who I am and doesn’t care that I’m scarred to high heaven.”

Sarah snorted.

“You’re not scarred to high heaven. There are only two, and both of them are barely noticeable.”

“It’s very kind of you to lie, Sarah, but they are noticeable.”

“Caroline, if you bring attention to it, people are going to stare. But you don’t need to be so concerned about them. The gentleman who chooses you as a wife isn’t going to care.”

If they knew how much money was in Caroline’s dowry, they really wouldn’t care. But Caroline wanted a husband who loved her for her, not because of the money that came with her. That was not fair. Unfortunately, there were occasions when she had no idea if someone was in her company because they wanted to be around her or because of the dowry.

So much for wanting a husband who loved her for just being her.

The hairs on the back of Caroline's neck started to prickle, which had her sitting up. Something had changed, but she couldn't be sure what. Then she saw the young man in a red jacket step into the dining room. Tall, raven-haired with a full, trimmed beard, he stood tall with a poise that spoke of arrogant confidence.

Her heart began to race, and Caroline began to panic. Oh, no. She had hoped to keep away from this man. She had been hoping she could avoid him all evening, but here he was, standing there like he owned the place.

Panic faded, and the rage began to build. He really thought he could walk in here as if nothing had happened? Like he hadn't physically harmed her? That made her feel sick.

"Caroline?" Sarah touched her hand. "Caroline, what is it?"

"It's him." Caroline swallowed. Her mouth had gone dry. "It's Henry Beaufort. He's here."

"Where?"

"Can't you see him? The one in the red coat."

Sarah looked with a frown. She shook her head.

“That’s not Henry. That’s his brother.”

“What?” Caroline started. “His brother?”

“James Beaufort went into the army. That’s what you told me. Army officers wear red coats. Blue is for the navy.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in. Caroline realised that she was right. James Beaufort had been enlisted by his father two years ago, and he had been in France ever since. Caroline was aware that he had been back on leave quite a few times, but their paths hadn’t crossed. She wasn’t sure if she could when she knew she would remember his brother whenever she looked at James.

Then James caught sight of her, and he stared at her for a moment. She watched as a broad smile spread across his face, and he began to walk across the room to her.

Oh, God. What did she do now? Caroline looked around, hoping there was a way she could get out of this. But there wasn’t.

“Lady Caroline?” James stopped at the table, still staring at her. “Is that you?”

“Lord Beaufort.” Wincing as Sarah kicked her under the table, Caroline got to her feet, just remembering to drop a curtsy. “Or do you prefer your army title?”

“It’s Corporal Beaufort, so I think we’ll stick to Lord.” James grinned. “It sounds a bit more regal, don’t you think?”

He hadn’t bowed to her, Caroline noticed. It looked like the army hadn’t improved his manners. She arched an eyebrow at him, and it took a moment for James to realise he had forgotten something. He cleared his throat and bowed.

“Forgive me; I completely forgot. I was just so stunned by your beauty.”

“That’s one way to get yourself out of a faux pas, My Lord.” Caroline turned to Sarah, who was also on her feet. “This is my friend, Lady Lakeford.”

“Delighted.” James gave Sarah a bow but was immediately focused on Caroline, his eyes glinting. “You’re looking lovely tonight, Lady Caroline. You’ve really blossomed.”

Caroline blinked. She hadn’t seen him in years, except in passing before he enlisted, so this came out of the blue. She licked her lips.

“I ... I don’t know what to say to that.”

“Well, how about you don’t say anything except yes to a dance with me.” James’ smile widened. “I think Lady Ashburn has the orchestra set up to start in a moment. She’s managing to corral several

gentlemen out of the game room.”

“Dance with you?” Caroline squeaked.

“I will admit that I haven’t danced in a while, but I like to think that I can be a good partner.”

Sarah nudged her.

“Go on. You’ve been wanting to dance for a while.”

Caroline had, but with James Beaufort? She wasn’t sure about that. On the other hand, he wasn’t his brother. He was actually the nice brother. It wouldn’t hurt to dance with him. She smiled and came around the table to take James’ arm.

“All right. That sounds like a good idea.”

#

Henry smiled when he saw the cards in his hand. He had this won easily. He laid them out on the table. Lord Bingham sighed and put his cards down. They were nowhere near a winning hand.

“You got me again, Bannock. I’m impressed with your card-playing skills.” His eyes twinkled as he counted out the coins beside him. “Do

you actually do any work during the day on your ship?"

"Why do you say that, Lord Bingham?"

"Because what you've shown could only come from hours of practise."

Henry chuckled and picked up his whisky glass. He had been playing cards since he arrived, and Bingham was the only one who appreciated what he was doing. Everyone else grumbled and said he was cheating, and they chose not to play against him.

"One of the men on my ship is a card shark. Did it for a bit of money before he was caught and put on a boat to avoid going to prison." Henry sipped his drink. "He taught me a few things."

"I might want to meet him." Bingham finished counting and pushed the coins across the table. "It would save me from losing so much money if I know how to play properly. Do you play chess as well?"

"I used to when I was a child. But we don't have a chessboard on the ship."

Bingham cast him a smile, his eyes twinkling.

"Maybe you should come over to the house at some point. My wife doesn't play, and Caroline is becoming too predictable. I miss having a game against someone who keeps me on my toes."

To play chess again. Henry had enjoyed playing with his father when he was younger. It was pretty much the only time he and the Duke of Cornwall could actually spend time together and feel like they were father and son. Cornwall had tried to get Henry to play with James, but James didn't have the patience, and he ended up throwing a tantrum, which just resulted in Henry being scolded for not going easy on his brother.

He hadn't realised until he was put on the ship that his brother didn't just ruin his fun.

"Are you sure about having me in your house, Lord Bingham? Your wife and your daughter ..."

"What about them?"

"They don't have a very high opinion of me." Henry shifted in his seat. "I'm surprised you even want to be in my presence after ... well, you know ..."

Bingham smiled, the smile reaching his eyes.

"I make my opinions on people through my own experiences, not by what people say. You've been a respectable gentleman with me, so I'm going to trust my judgement about you."

For a moment, Henry wasn't sure what to say. The only people who had accepted him for who he was and knew the real side of him were

the sailors he worked with. They saw the person Henry actually was, and they didn't care about a reputation that wasn't of his own making. That was another reason why he had refrained from taking leave for longer than a day; people still remembered his 'reputation', and Henry knew he couldn't change anyone's opinion.

It was just not fair. All he had done was protect his brother, and James had taken advantage of it.

"Why don't you go and meet some people, Bannock?" Bingham gestured towards the door. "You can't stay in here forever, you know. And your brother wandered off some time ago."

Go out into the rest of the house, where everyone would be looking at him. Henry's chest tightened at the thought, and he shifted in his seat.

"I'd rather stay here, Lord Bingham. My brother's a grown man. He doesn't need someone watching over him."

"It won't hurt to stretch your legs for five minutes." Bingham shrugged, picking up his glass. "Off you go, young man. I'll be here when you get back."

He wasn't going to get out of this, and none of the other gentlemen wanted to be his opponent. They were already giving him snide looks, watching him in silence. They must think he had been cheating. Henry had never cheated in his life, but there was no changing someone's mind once it was made up.

Putting the coins he had won into his purse, Henry shoved it into his

pocket and got up. Just once around the ballroom, maybe outside for a moment, and then back into the gaming room. If they allowed him back in.

Henry wished he had been more forceful about staying home. He had said he didn't need to be James' chaperone, but his mother had insisted. That he needed to be a normal, civilised person, and going out to meet people would be perfect for that. Henry didn't think that would be the case. He knew how to be around people and interact with them. There was no miracle to it; being in the company of lords and ladies didn't make someone a better person. Henry was quite happy to spend his leave doing what he wanted, but his parents wouldn't hear of it.

So much for being a grown man and being left to his own devices. Once he was back under their roof, Henry was back to being a boy. Ignore the fact that he only needed one more journey at sea, and he would be able to buy his own ship and have his own crew at the mere age of twenty. Ignore the fact he had two combat medals. He was the troubled heir to a dukedom who was a bully and a thug.

And someone capable of shooting at a human being.

Henry wished he had set things straight years ago. He would never have done that to an innocent person, and certainly not to someone like Caroline Folton. She had never done anything wrong, and yet James had thought it would be amusing. Henry had tried to stop him, and it was only because he grabbed the pistol when James fired that Caroline hadn't actually been hit.

But she was very set in her opinion. She believed it was him, and Henry knew changing her mind would be next to impossible. From what he had heard of her, Caroline Folton was incredibly stubborn. That would be a very admirable trait if it weren't for the fact that her

view of Henry was mixed up in it.

Not looking anyone in the eye, Henry bypassed the ballroom and entered the dining room. If he went into the ballroom, he would be expected to ask one of the many ladies for a dance. He didn't like dancing, and he had a feeling nobody would want to dance with him with his reputation. The cool looks he had received when arriving hadn't helped much.

Just a little longer, and then he would leave. Then he could say that he actually went out and socialised. Even if it was just with one person, someone who treated him like a man rather than a monster in the making.

There was a dark-haired young woman close to his age sitting at a table in the dining room, finishing off what was left on her plate. She wasn't someone who could stand out in a crowd, but she was certainly very striking.

And very familiar. Henry couldn't believe what he was seeing. She was here as well?

"Sarah?"

Sarah Marcus looked up and did a double-take. Then she was beaming as she got to her feet, wiping her hands on her napkin.

"Henry! Oh, goodness!" She grasped his hands and accepted his kiss to her cheek. "I didn't realise you were in London."

“I’ve been put on strict leave. I’m to keep away from my ship for two months to give myself a proper rest.” Henry looked her up and down. “How long has it been? Eighteen months?”

“Close enough. You’re looking well.” Sarah gave him an appreciative look. “Although I am surprised to see you here. I thought you said you would never come to any of these, even if you got the dukedom.”

Henry sighed.

“I was contemplating staying at home, but Mother and Father insisted that I came out to socialise with people who aren’t sailors. Get myself more civilised, in their words.”

Sarah snorted.

“They have no idea what they’re talking about. Sailors are the most civilised people I know.”

Henry smiled. Sarah would say that. A lot of her family was closely involved in the navy. Her father was an admiral, her uncle a vice-admiral, and two of her brothers were in the navy as well. Her younger brother, Michael, worked on Henry’s ship. He had been there since the age of eight as a powder monkey, and now he was a midshipman working towards his exams. Henry had taken him under his wing and looked after him. Made sure he didn’t get into trouble. His father had been very pleased with Henry keeping Michael on the right path and had recommended him for promotion already.

None of them saw Henry as someone who would physically attack someone because he thought it was amusing.

“There are some days when I wish I were a man.” Sarah sighed. “I would rather be out on the sea than going around looking for a husband who would accept me for who I am.”

“I’m sure you’ll find someone soon.”

“I don’t know about that. If I didn’t go out with Caroline, I would be holed up in the library with a good book.” Sarah made a face. “You know I don’t like crowds.”

“Caroline?”

“Caroline Folton, Lord Bingham’s daughter. Your neighbours in Buckinghamshire?”

Caroline. Henry felt like the air had been sucked out of him. He already knew she was here, but just hearing her name left Henry feeling breathless. His heart wasn’t sure whether to stop or race so fast it made him light-headed. His mouth was dry just thinking about her.

How was it possible that a girl he had only spoken to twice in nine years could have such an effect on him?

“Henry?” Sarah tugged his hand. “Henry, are you still with me? You

looked a little pale there.”

“What? Oh.” Henry cleared his throat. He needed to focus. “I haven’t seen Lady Caroline in four years. Not since the day before I was made to go to sea.”

“I see.” Sarah tilted her head to one side. “You mean the day ...”

“I do.”

Sarah knew the truth. She had been curious as to why a duke’s son and heir was out at sea instead of being at home learning how to run the dukedom. Henry had been candid with her, and he told her the truth. And she had listened. For the first time, someone listened. That hadn’t happened before. When Sarah said she believed him, Henry had felt the air rush out of him. A huge weight off his shoulders.

Why wouldn’t anyone else believe him like Sarah Marcus?

“Do people still think you’re a bad person?” Sarah asked. “Even after all this time?”

“Even after that.” Henry pulled his hands away with a sigh. People were beginning to stare at them holding hands. “Doesn’t matter how many medals I got while I was at sea or how many battles I fought in. I’ll always be the one who causes trouble. Even the servants are hostile towards me. They believe the lies.”

“I don’t.”

“And that I’m surprised about.”

Sarah huffed.

“Come on; even a clever person would realise why a duke’s heir was where you were. I believed you were a good person because you kept Michael out of trouble. Everyone sang your praises on the ship, and Father can’t commend you high enough. If you can do that for a boy you don’t know, you would certainly do it for your brother.”

Henry wished he had known Sarah growing up. It would have been nice to have someone on his side.

“It’s a shame everyone isn’t like you. I need more of you around.”

“Now that’s a scary thought.” Sarah frowned. “Caroline believes you’re a bad person, does she?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“I could always talk to her.”

Henry shook his head.

“No, Sarah.”

“Why not? You’re a friend, and I don’t like seeing you get treated so unfairly ...”

“Please, Sarah. Don’t. If you know Caroline Folton, you’ll know that you won’t be able to change her mind. Unless I can prove that I didn’t do it, which I can’t, I won’t be able to prove that I’m innocent.”

“So, we should leave it.” Sarah folded her arms. “Even if it means you’re unfairly judged?”

“Even then.”

Sarah didn’t look happy with that judgement. She pursed her lips.

“All right. I won’t say anything if you don’t want me to. But don’t expect me to be quiet if you’re spoken about in a manner that I don’t care for.”

Henry had to fight back a smile. Sarah was so much like her brother in terms of loyalty; it was remarkable. It really was a shame that she hadn’t been around in Henry’s younger years; things might have been easier if she had.

And then he wouldn’t be alone against his brother.

Chapter 5

Caroline had gone into the dance expecting to have her toes trodden on and that she would have a bad time. But she was pleasantly surprised when James showed he was very light on his feet. He followed the dance beautifully, and he didn't bump into her at all. It was, overall, a very nice dance.

That she hadn't expected. Caroline had thought James would be as awful as his brother. He certainly had an attitude that rubbed her the wrong way. It was uncomfortable being around him, but he was a good dance partner. That was something in his favour.

"There, My Lady," James said as the music stopped moments after bowing to each other. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"It was ... enjoyable." Caroline smoothed her skirts down. "You're better on your feet than you realise, Lord Beaufort."

James grinned. His eyes glinted.

"I'm glad you think so. We don't do much dancing in the army."

"Not many opportunities to go and dance, I take it?"

"Well, for the officers, yes. They go to several balls, but the masses have to stay at the camp and make sure there aren't any surprise

attacks.” James gestured at himself. “That is my job.”

Caroline frowned.

“But you’re the second son of a duke. Surely, you’d be allowed to go there as well.”

“Second son, Lady Caroline. Not the first son and heir. If I were the heir, that would be another matter.” James held out an arm. “I think the only dancing I do when I’m in France is trying to get away from enemy gunfire. I like to think I’m quick and light on my feet.”

Caroline rolled her eyes and smiled as she took his arm.

“You certainly know how to make a girl smile, My Lord.”

“I haven’t started yet. You’ll see the best of me later.”

Caroline blinked. There was something behind his words that made a shiver go down her spine. She swallowed.

“Was ... what do you mean by that?”

“You like to dance, don’t you? I’m sure I can find time for a second dance later on this evening.” James nodded at the young ladies congregating nearby, two giggling as he gave them a smile. “The

ladies wish me to partake in the activity with them as well.”

Caroline could see why. James Beaufort was a very handsome man, and he had been getting a lot of people looking at him while they were dancing. Caroline had noticed it, and she wasn't surprised. If she had taken James at face value, she might have done the same. But she couldn't. There was something behind James that made him ... she wasn't sure how to describe it, but she didn't like it. Her gut was saying there was something wrong with James, and he was someone she needed to keep her distance from.

But she knew it would be considered rude if she turned him down for a dance without good reason, and Caroline couldn't think of a reason to refuse. Swallowing, she managed to fix a smile on her face.

“I think if you came to me and asked for another dance, Lord Beaufort, I would accept.”

“I'm honoured.” James looked up, and he smirked. “Oh, I see my brother. You remember Henry, don't you?”

Caroline froze. Henry was here as well? Her chest tightened, and she began to panic. This was just what she wanted to avoid. Why couldn't he just leave her alone? He knew how people felt about him, including Caroline? Why couldn't he just stay at sea?

“Lady Caroline?” James peered at her. “Are you all right? You've gone quite pale.”

“I ... I don't wish to speak to your brother.”

“Why not?”

Caroline glared at him.

“You know the reason why. I don’t want to be around him.”

James scoffed, his hand tightening over hers as she tried to pull away.

“Oh, stop this. Henry’s changed. He’s a decent man now, from what I’ve seen. It’ll just be polite if I introduce you again. Besides, I don’t think you’re going to get your friend away from him right now.”

“My friend?”

Caroline’s heart sank when she saw Sarah in the doorway to the dining room. She was talking to a tall, broad-shouldered man with black hair and a brown face that said he had spent a lot of time in the sun. Was that Henry Beaufort? It couldn’t be. Caroline remembered a tall, scrawny boy. This couldn’t be the same person.

Then he turned, and Caroline saw his eyes. Those brilliant blue eyes that had snared her the first time they met. She hadn’t been able to forget them. This was Henry Beaufort, without a doubt. And that piercing gaze of his ... that had been on her mind for years.

Her legs felt weak, and Caroline had to grip onto James' arm so she didn't fall. Her heart felt like it was racing far too fast. Swallowing, she drew up and squared her shoulders.

"A greeting," she said stiffly. "Just a greeting, and then I'm walking away. I don't want anything to do with him."

"Fair enough." James tugged on her arm. "Come along, My Lady."

Caroline was surprised she could walk as she was tugged across the room towards Henry and Sarah. The two of them seemed to be talking like they were good friends. Caroline felt the rage building again, but this time it was directed at Sarah. She knew what Henry had done to Caroline and how much her friend hated the man. And she was talking to him with a broad smile that made her eyes sparkle. Was she enamoured of him? How could she even consider it?

Caroline planned to drag Sarah away and scold her friend for her conduct. It felt like a betrayal.

Sarah and Henry watched as James almost dragged Caroline towards them. Henry's eyes never strayed from Caroline, and Caroline found that she couldn't look away, either. It was like he was looking right inside her head.

Could he see the anger she had towards him? The hatred? If he could, he would walk away right now. Caroline silently wished that he would.

But he just watched her approach, his expression blank, but the fire in

his eyes burning brightly. Caroline realised that she wanted to run away, but James didn't seem to notice her discomfort now, tugging her to stand beside him as he reached his brother.

"Henry, there you are. I see you've found Lady Caroline's friend."

"Lady Lakeford and I were just catching up." Henry glanced at Sarah, and his expression softened. "It's been a while since we last saw each other."

Caroline stared at Sarah.

"You two know each other? You never said."

"My brother Michael is on Henry's ship as a midshipman." Sarah shrugged. "I didn't mention it as I knew such news would cause you distress."

That didn't sound right. Sarah didn't seem to be too bothered that she had been caught out, but her explanation didn't sit well with Caroline. She really needed a long talk with her friend.

"Lady Caroline." Henry's deep timbre broke through Caroline's thoughts. She looked up to see him bowing to her. "It's a pleasure. You've really grown up."

"With no help from you," Caroline snapped.

Something flickered in his expression, but then it was gone. Sarah looked uncomfortable and started to shuffle from foot to foot, but James looked amused. It was like he was enjoying the discomfort.

Henry tore his eyes away from Caroline's and looked over her shoulder.

"I see that people are preparing for another dance. Would you care to join me, My Lady?"

"Join you ..."

Caroline couldn't believe what she was hearing. He was actually asking her for a dance? Her first instinct was to say absolutely not, but then she realised that her reasoning would be dismissed. Henry had a temper, from what she had been told, and if she turned him down, he would cause a scene to know why. Caroline didn't want that to happen. Taking a deep breath, she rolled her shoulders and nodded.

"All right. But just one dance. And don't expect another one."

Henry grunted.

"I'm fine with that. Although you should consider yourself flattered. I don't ask people to dance."

That didn't flatter her at all. Caroline didn't want to dance with him at all, but she didn't want to cause a scene. Fighting back a scowl, she turned to Sarah.

"I would like to leave after this dance, Sarah. Would you notify Father and ask for the carriage to be ready?"

"What?" Sarah blinked. "Are you sure about this?"

"I'm sure."

There was no point in being here now that she knew Henry was present. It was just going to make things even more uncomfortable. Caroline considered the evening ruined now.

She just had to get through this one dance, and then she would leave. It was better that way. Her father would understand.

"Surely you've only been here a short while?" Henry said as they went onto the dancefloor. "You arrived with your father shortly before I did."

"I've been here long enough," Caroline said coldly. "I'm finding the company a little bit ... unwanted right now."

"If I were a lesser man, I'd be insulted by that."

“You should be.” Caroline fixed him with a glare. “You can’t expect me to greet you with a smile and a lot of warmth after what you’ve done, can you?”

Henry’s eyes flashed. He drew her to the middle of the room just as the other dancers started.

“I think we should concentrate on the dance and not talk. Don’t you think that’s preferable?”

“I ...” Then Caroline realised what the dance was. “But this is the waltz. We shouldn’t be dancing to this!”

“Why not?”

“Because ...”

Because you and I will never be romantically involved. It’s never going to happen.

“Do you want to walk off now?” Henry said sardonically, pulling her into his arms and urging her to move. “I’m sure that would draw attention, seeing as we’re in the middle of the room. Everyone can see us.”

He was right. If she walked off now, everyone would be staring. Caroline lifted her chin and stared at his chest.

“I do this under protest.”

Henry snorted.

“So beautiful, but so immature. Nice to see you haven’t changed.”

“Immature?” Caroline’s eyes snapped up. “You call what I’m doing immature? I’m not the one who attacked someone and left them permanently disfigured!”

“I’m looking at you now, and I can’t see any disfigurement.”

That left Caroline speechless for a moment. She had a scar that was very clear to see, and Henry had to be staring right at it. How could he say he couldn’t see it?

“You know where my scars are, Lord Bannock. You put them there.”

“I prefer Lieutenant Beaufort. I’m sure once my parents have sorted things out, I won’t have the Lord Bannock title.”

“That doesn’t change anything.”

Henry sighed, twirling her around.

“Lady Caroline, it’s not what you think ...”

“It’s exactly what I think,” Caroline said tightly. “And don’t think that four years away from England is going to make me like you. It hasn’t made me like you at all. Quite the opposite. You forfeited that chance when you hurt me nine years ago. I want nothing to do with you.”

Henry’s expression tightened. His eyes glittered. There was the dangerous man she had been trying to avoid. The temper was starting to come through. For a moment, Caroline wondered if she should have pulled back. She had told herself to get through this without a scene, but just a few words from Henry Beaufort, and she came back fighting. That was bad of her. And Caroline couldn’t help it. Henry just brought out the worst in her.

He looked like he was going to lose his temper. But then Henry took a deep breath, and his hand tightened around hers, the hand on the small of her back flexing.

“Very well. Once the dance is done, I’ll leave you alone.”

“Good. Just keep away from me in the future, and we’ll both be happy.”

Henry’s jaw tightened.

“I can do that. This will be the last time I bother you.”

Caroline should have felt relieved. So why did this leave a bad taste in her mouth?

#

Caroline was shaking as she and Sarah went out to the carriage. That had been a horrible dance. She had been forced to endure a waltz with Henry Beaufort, a romantic dance meant solely for those courting or married couples. Not for two people who actively hated each other. That shouldn't have been the dance Henry chose for her.

She really should have braced herself for the loss of temper and said no. Surely, a grown man would be able to keep himself controlled in a public setting? But that temper she had heard about and the impolite refusal to dance had made Caroline accept, albeit reluctantly. Henry could dance, and he was light on his feet, but his company just made Caroline feel very hot and bothered.

Even now, she could feel his hands on her. They seemed to have left an impression on her body. Her stomach felt like it was turning over, her heart was racing, and Caroline was sure she was sweating. She opened the window as the carriage set off and let the cool air wash over her.

What was going on with her? Why was her body reacting in such a way? Was it because she was around someone she disliked? But Caroline had been in the presence of people she didn't care for, and none of them had made her feel like this. What was happening to her?

“Caroline?” Sarah sat across from her, swaying to the bumping of the carriage. She leaned over and touched Caroline’s knee. “Are you all right? You’re looking rather flushed.”

“What? Oh, I’m fine now.” Caroline brought out her handkerchief and dabbed her forehead. “I’m just glad to be away from there.”

“I see.” Sarah still looked concerned. “I thought we were going to be there for the rest of the evening. Your father said ...”

“Father says a lot of things. He’ll understand why I had to leave.” Caroline leaned back with a huff. “He knows my feelings on the Beaufort brothers.”

Sarah’s expression flickered a little. She withdrew her hand from Caroline’s knee and sat back with a sigh.

“Look, Caroline, I think you’re putting too much on the past.”

“Wouldn’t you if someone tried to kill you and you had to interact with them?” Caroline snapped. She glared at her friend. “You know my feelings on Henry Beaufort. I told you about him plenty of times. And there you are, talking to him like you’re old friends and not interjecting when I have to dance with him! What is wrong with you?”

“You know that it’s rude to turn someone down, and I think it was the right choice to agree to a dance.”

“Not to him! And not to a waltz!”

“That’s coincidental, nothing more.” Sarah spread her hands. “The Henry Beaufort I know is a decent man. He’s a dedicated person, and he’s loyal to those who deserve it. You can’t get any better than that.”

“Loyal? Decent? Dedicated? You’re playing with me, aren’t you?” Caroline held up her hand, gesturing at her head. “He gave me these! And he shot at me!”

“How do you know he was the one who shot at you? You didn’t see it happen.”

Caroline couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Sarah had been sympathetic to her situation when they first talked, and now she was starting to be on the side of the man who disfigured her? What poison had Henry put in her ear?

“He had a pistol on him, Sarah, and he’s the one who causes trouble. Who else would it be?” She sat forward. “Why are you so focused on him, anyway? Why are you on his side?”

“Because I know Henry’s not like that.” Sarah didn’t even blink as Caroline glowered at her. “I said nothing before as I could see you were hurting, and it was not for me to say anything against the man you’ve already made up your mind about, but I know he’s not the type to go around shooting people.”

“How?” Caroline sneered. “Because he made sure your brother didn’t

get into trouble at sea?”

“Michael was eight years old when he went into the navy. They got into their first skirmish with pirates just days later. Henry protected my brother, even saved him from drowning when the pirates threw Michael overboard.” Sarah’s voice caught. “He wouldn’t be alive now if it wasn’t for Henry Beaufort.”

“And I should have a bleeding heart for him? Is that what you’re saying?”

Sarah sighed and lowered her head, rubbing her hands over her eyes. She looked exhausted.

“I’m just saying that you’re taking your hatred for Henry a little too far. It’s becoming ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous?”

“Maybe the two interactions you’ve had with him don’t tell the whole story. They were traumatic, yes, but they were brief. You saw what you wanted to see because of everyone’s opinion of him, and it’s affecting your judgement now.”

Caroline felt like Sarah had slapped her across the face. She had been so supportive in the past. And she was calling this ridiculous?

“My judgement has never been affected, Sarah. Never.”

“Has it not?” Sarah shot back. Even in the shadows, Caroline could see her friend’s face reddening as she looked up. “Because I see an honourable man who’s in pain because nobody believes him when he tells a simple, honest truth.”

Caroline snorted.

“Nobody believes him because he’s a liar.”

“Like his brother, you mean?”

“What?”

“James is known to lie. I’ve heard stories about him in the army, and the lies he told weren’t harmless.”

“I don’t believe that.” Caroline leaned towards the window, feeling the cool air hit her face again. Her anger was making her feel hot again. “James was actually decent to me tonight. A little arrogant, yes, but with his heritage, that is no surprise. I think he was quite taken with me, though.”

“How can you be sure?”

“From the way he was behaving.”

Sarah rolled her eyes.

“He’s like that with all the women. Miss Lynette Bergman entered the room, and James gravitated towards her so fast it was like she had tied a string around his waist and pulled. He has no real interest in you.” She smirked. “Out of the two of them, Henry was more taken with you.”

Henry more taken with her? Caroline shuddered even as she felt a shiver down her back. However, unlike the one when James smiled at her, this one was far more pleasant.

She had to be coming down with an illness if she was finding a detestable shiver pleasant.

“That’s not possible, Sarah.”

“You think it isn’t? I saw the way he looked at you before you joined us. It was like you had hit him over the head. And he asked you to dance.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Henry doesn’t dance. He’s told me so before. Absolutely refuses to do it with anyone, no matter what they do to force him.” Sarah gave her a meaningful look. “The fact he asked you for a dance means something, Caroline.”

“I don’t think so.” Caroline shook her head. “He probably wanted to torment me again.”

Sarah groaned and hit the side of the carriage with her fist, causing Caroline to jump.

“For heaven’s sake, Caroline! Why do you have to be on the attack all the time? You met him twice before tonight. That’s not enough to form a proper opinion of someone. After a few minutes, you can’t think anything of him that could be considered a fair judgement.” Sarah sat forward. “You really believe that Henry Beaufort, a lieutenant in the Royal Navy with several commendations for his duty at sea, is actually capable of being a cold, heartless man?”

When she put it like that, it did sound rather stupid. But Caroline knew in her heart that Henry was not a good man. She was certain of it. Everyone who knew Henry said he was a bad sort and would get himself into trouble. The commendations meant nothing; it just covered up what was really underneath.

A bad, dangerous person with a temper. And he was not someone Caroline wanted around her. If given half a chance, she would end up getting hurt again by him.

“You’re my friend, Sarah. You’re supposed to be on my side!”

“And I would be if you weren’t being so unfair!”

“Unfair?” Caroline sat up. “How am I being unfair?”

“Because you’re choosing to believe the worst of him when you don’t even know the whole story,” Sarah shot back sharply, breathing heavily. “I understand you had two bad experiences, and I understand your reluctance to be around him, but that doesn’t mean you should outright hate him. You’re letting other people influence your judgement of him before he’s been given a chance, just like everyone else in his life.”

“I don’t let anyone influence me.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Of course!”

“Then you should hear him out.”

Caroline barked out a laugh.

“Why should I hear him out? He’s not going to tell me the truth.”

Sarah’s face changed. She looked furious, which surprised Caroline. Sarah was normally a placid person. She couldn’t remember ever seeing Sarah lose her temper. Caroline jumped as her friend rapped sharply on the roof of the carriage.

“Travers! Could you stop here, please?”

“What are you doing, Sarah?”

“I’m going to walk the rest of the way.” Sarah adjusted the clasp of her cloak. “We shouldn’t be too far from my house.”

Caroline scoffed.

“Don’t be silly. It’s dark now. You shouldn’t be on your own.”

“I think I’d prefer to walk home alone instead of listening to you slander a good man’s name.”

“What do you mean, slander? It was true!”

“Caroline, you never saw who fired the shot at you four years ago. And you never saw who tackled you and cut your head open nine years ago. It could easily have been James. You just went with the person everyone else believed it was. They had a bad opinion of him, so you followed what they thought.” Sarah opened the carriage door. “And now you won’t change your mind because your stubbornness and pride are getting in the way. I’m not going to be a part of it.”

Caroline was left startled. She was speechless as Sarah jumped out onto the pavement.

“Once you’re prepared to apologise for such childish opinions, let me know. I’ll wait.” She glared at Caroline. “And I hope you can swallow your pride and not be such a brat when you apologise to Henry. That’s the least you should do.”

“Sarah ...”

But Sarah had already shut the door and disappeared from sight. Caroline looked out the window and saw her friend storming away with her cloak flowing out behind her. It wasn’t quite dark, but it was quiet out in the streets. Not a good time to be on her own, but Caroline knew Sarah would not be tempted back into the carriage.

“Lady Caroline?”

She looked up. Travers was leaning over the side, giving her a worried look. Caroline sighed.

“Just follow her at a distance. Make sure she gets home safely. And then take me home.”

“Yes, My Lady.”

There was nothing more Caroline could do. She couldn’t entice her friend back inside, but she could watch out for her. She settled back on her seat and pressed a hand to her belly. Her stomach was churning even more. Thoughts of Henry Beaufort were filling her

head, and it was just making her feel angrier.

Angry because she couldn't stop thinking about his hands on her.

Chapter 6

“Well,” James declared as he poured himself a drink, “that was an enjoyable evening.”

Henry grunted.

“If you say so.”

“I know so.” James preened, running a hand over his hair with a smirk. “The ladies are very inviting. Very interested. They like being around a hero.”

“Hero?” Henry scoffed. “You haven’t told Mother and Father the truth, have you?”

James bristled and glowered at her brother.

“I am a hero, Henry, and no one is going to tell me otherwise. Not even you.”

Henry bit back a retort. There was no point in trying to argue with James on the matter. Both of them knew that he was not a hero, and he certainly shouldn’t be calling himself one. Henry had friends in the same regiment, and their interpretation of the situations James described was certainly different. With James’ history of lying, Henry was more inclined to believe them. James was a coward, pure and

simple.

Unfortunately, his history of lying kept getting in the way. It didn't matter if Henry and James' fellow soldiers were able to disprove his stories; nobody would listen. Especially not their parents. They had been taken in by him since he was a little boy, and now it was firmly in their minds that James was a hero who was not given any medals because his superior officers were too ashamed to admit they had their messes cleaned up by a junior officer.

Henry felt sick hearing his supposed exploits, over and over again, knowing that his mother and father lapped them up. How did they not realise they were being fed lies? And it made it worse when Henry received medals for fighting with bravery during sea battles, and neither of his parents acknowledged them. They just said he received them because he was present.

He had hoped the obvious favouritism would stop now both brothers were grown men. Evidently, it was never going to stop.

Henry couldn't wait to go back to his ship and never have to deal with his family again.

James took a hefty swig of his drink before topping it up. Henry frowned.

"You've been drinking a lot, James. Maybe you should ease up on it."

"I don't think I should." James practically stuck his nose in the air. "You're not my father."

“Thank God for that.”

“You’re just bitter because you came out and interacted with normal people.”

Henry scowled and went to the fire, staring into the flames. He should have just gone straight to his room instead of following his brother into the drawing room.

“I told everyone that I didn’t want to come out.”

James barked out a laugh loud enough to make Henry wince.

“You’re a grown man, Henry. You could have just said no.”

“You know that’s not an option. It’s like I’ve lost the right to say no.”

Henry had been shocked that his parents were treating him like he was ten years old. He hadn’t wanted to go out at all, preferring to stay in his room or simply out of the way of his family, but his father said he was going, and that was the end of it.

Not for the first time, he wished he had rented a room in London instead of coming back to his family home. At least he would have more freedom.

“Well, you need to be made respectable,” James said, flopping onto one of the chairs, his drink sloshing over the side of the glass. “And going out to interact with regular people instead of the rowdy sailors would be perfect. Besides, you even managed a dance.” He waggled his eyebrows. “With the lovely Caroline Folton.”

Caroline Folton. Henry felt the stirring of something hot in his belly at the mere thought of her. He hadn’t expected to come into contact with her, and he certainly hadn’t expected her to have such an effect on him. She had been very pretty when he last saw her, but now Henry could hardly take his eyes off her when he caught sight of her. Caroline had blossomed into a really beautiful young lady.

“It was just a one-off,” Henry grunted, pushing away the sensation in his belly.

“Enough that you couldn’t actually take your eyes off her and even when she made you angry.” James chuckled. “She still believes you were the one who ...”

“I know she does, and I’m not happy about it.”

Unfortunately, her attitude towards him hadn’t blossomed. She was cold to him, practically like ice. And that hurt. Henry had hoped the time away from her would be a good healer, and she might be more amenable towards him, but that hadn’t happened. Caroline saw him as the person who hurt her and scarred her for life. That scar on her forehead was very clear to see, even with the placement of her hair. Henry had tried not to stare at it.

How could James look at her and not remember that day when he saw that scar? Because Henry remembered every detail, and it made him feel even worse.

“I must say, she’s really grown up now,” James commented, taking a healthy gulp of his drink. “Beautiful. Very beautiful. I’ve also heard she’s very spritely in conversations. You’re guaranteed something entertaining whenever she’s around. She’s also up for flirtations with gentlemen. Apparently, for her Season last year, Caroline Folton was flirting with a lot of young men.”

Henry turned. He didn’t like knowing that Caroline had flirted with any man that came into sight, but from the way James was talking about her meant he was up to something.

“What are you saying, James? You’re not thinking about having a flirtation with her, are you?”

“Why not? I’ve got a lot of leave saved up, so I’ve got plenty of time to kill before I go back.” James sniggered. “Might as well have a bit of fun.”

Instead of the stirring of something warm in his gut, Henry could feel a hard knot building. James was planning something, and it wasn’t good. None of his plans turned out well, which was why he got into so much trouble. Caroline didn’t deserve that, and Henry just knew his brother was going to plan something that meant Caroline ended up in tears again.

No one deserved that.

“James, don’t.”

James snorted.

“You think you have any authority over me? You’re my brother, Henry, not my superior.”

“Did you talk back to your superior officers like this?”

From James’ faltering, it was clear that he did. Henry sighed and fought back a yawn. He was exhausted.

“You’re right that I don’t have authority over you, but I am entitled to have an opinion. Lady Caroline is having her Season, and she’s looking for a husband, not a flirtation.”

“How can you tell? Did she tell you?”

“I spoke with her father.”

James arched an eyebrow.

“And Lord Bingham actually spoke to you?”

“Yes, he did.”

“I’m surprised he would speak to you at all.”

Henry was a little surprised by it himself, but he was humbled by Lord Bingham’s words. That was a friendship that he should hold onto. It was more precious to him than Henry realised at the time. He rolled his shoulders, trying to relieve the tension around his neck.

“Lord Bingham told me that she’s looking for someone to marry. Someone who can love her and treat her as she needs. You have no intention of marrying, and I know you can’t treat her as she should be treated. So, keep your hands off her.”

James scoffed, looping his leg over the arm of the chair and swinging it.

“You don’t think I can get her to flirt with me? It’s just a bit of fun.”

“A bit? It’s never that with you.” Henry approached his brother. “You’re not honourable with your intentions, James. You never have been. Just leave Lady Caroline be. She’s an innocent woman.”

The thought of James having anything romantic with Caroline made Henry feel sick. He didn’t want that image in his head. Caroline definitely deserved better than that.

Better than James. And definitely better than me.

James peered at his brother curiously.

“You’re very determined to watch over her, Henry, despite knowing that she hates you.”

“Well, she has good reason to when you listen to rumours and tall tales.”

James’ eyes glinted. He brought his leg down and sat forward.

“I tell you what, why don’t we make a game out of it?”

“A game of what?”

“Chasing Caroline Folton.” James smirked. “We have plenty of time off, and we haven’t had a challenge in a long time. Maybe we should see which of us she falls in love with.”

Henry stared. He was going to make this into a game?

“She’s not a toy, James. I’m not going to treat her like that. It’s best to leave her alone.”

“Well, it was just a suggestion.” James shrugged. “And I’ve got a bit of a handicap, anyway. I’m at a disadvantage.”

“What are you talking about?”

“From what I saw and from how you behaved, I’d say you’re half in love with her already.” James waggled his eyebrows. “I’ve never seen you look so stunned at the sight of a woman.”

Half in love with her. The thought left Henry hot and cold. How had James figured it out? Henry had thought it wouldn’t be obvious, considering he had barely been in Caroline’s company. But James had noticed. That was bad; his brother would not let him hear the end of it, being in love with a woman who hated him. Henry was already ashamed that he had strong feelings for someone he had only met twice before and knew she disliked him.

He fixed a glare in James’ direction.

“I’m not in love with her, and I don’t want to chase her,” he said firmly. “She doesn’t deserve to have a pair of halfwits chasing her because they think of it as a game.”

“Did you just call me a halfwit?”

“I called myself one as well, remember?”

James grunted, still not looking happy at being called a halfwit.

“So, you don’t want to have a bit of competition for the two months you’re here?”

“No, I don’t, and I don’t want to discuss Caroline Folton, either. She’s been hurt enough, James. Leave her alone.”

“She was hurt by you, Henry. Not me.”

Henry snarled.

“Not by me! For once in your life, admit that you did wrong!”

“Why would I do that?” James unfolded himself and stood up, putting his empty glass on the table by his chair. “I think I’m going to retire for the night. Goodnight, brother.”

Henry watched James leave, practically sauntering out the room. Growling, he kicked the poker stand, knocking the whole thing over. Then he slumped on the settee and buried his head in his hands.

Maybe he should get things sorted to stay elsewhere. Rent a cottage in the country or a room in the city. Anything that was away from here.

But if you leave, who's going to protect Caroline from James?

Chapter 7

“Come on, Caroline!” Caroline could hear her mother downstairs as she left her bedchamber. “Lady Lakeford is waiting!”

“I’m coming; I’m coming.” Caroline muttered.

She was feeling a little sluggish right now. It was warmer than expected today, and Caroline had struggled to sleep. It was not pleasant, and she wished that she was feeling different. Especially when she and Sarah were going to be at a tea party and be outside for most of it. How was she supposed to look cool and happy when she felt hot and grumpy?

Deep breaths. You’ll get through it as long as you stay in the shade.

There were times when Caroline hated warm weather. Especially when it came to her hair. That just decided to curl into a style that was uncontrollable, even after she had properly styled it. She just could not look decent when she was hot.

Hopefully, nobody was going to care today. If she was lucky, everyone else would be complaining about how hot it was, even though it was only April.

Caroline headed downstairs to find Lady Bingham talking to Sarah. Seeing her friend looking a little flushed and shiny-cheeked made her feel a little better. At least she wasn’t the only one.

Lady Bingham turned as her daughter came down the stairs.

“There you are! I was beginning to think you’d stepped into that wardrobe of yours and got lost.”

“I couldn’t find one of my shoes.” Caroline crossed the foyer. “My maid put it in a different place, for some reason.”

Her mother rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“Honestly, you need to properly sort out your clothes.” She adjusted the sleeves on her daughter’s dress. “Are you sure you’re going to be all right today?”

“Mother, it’s just a tea party. And I’ll be with Sarah the whole time. What could go wrong with that?”

“I know, but ...” Lady Bingham bit her lip. “I still worry.”

“Oh, Mother.” Caroline kissed her cheek. “I’ll tell you all about it when I come back. I’ll see you later, Mother.”

Stepping around the older woman, Caroline joined Sarah, and they left the house, stepping into Sarah’s carriage. As the carriage pulled away, Caroline looked out to see her mother standing on the steps, watching them disappear down the drive. For a moment, she felt a

stab of sympathy for Lady Bingham.

She had only been able to have one child, and it seemed to have sparked a bit of resentment towards her daughter for not having more children. But things had softened between them as Caroline grew up to the point that her mother was starting to get teary-eyed whenever her child left the house. She was seeing her daughter grow up before her eyes, and now she was starting to feel a little guilty for not being around as much as she should.

Caroline loved her mother. She just wished she didn't have to be so worried about her all the time.

The carriage rocked as it went onto the main road.

"Where are we going, Sarah?" Caroline asked.

"I told you, we were invited to tea at a family friend's house." Sarah backtracked a little. "Well, I was, and I asked if I could bring you along. They said yes."

"Who are these friends? You haven't said."

Sarah hesitated. Then she seemed to be very interested in her hands twisting around in her lap.

"You'll see."

Now Caroline was suspicious. Sarah was normally so forthcoming, and she had no problem telling Caroline anything. The fact she was not saying outright was concerning. She frowned.

“I don’t understand the secrecy. What’s going on?”

The carriage turned before Sarah said anything, causing Caroline to lean a little too much into the wall and bumping her shoulder. Sarah brightened up.

“We’re here.”

“Already?” Caroline was confused. “But nobody lives this close except ...”

Except the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall. Their residence was next door, and they had a long, winding driveway that practically curled around the Bingham estate. Caroline’s heart sank.

“Oh, no. Please, don’t let it be.”

“The Duchess of Cornwall invited me to tea with a few other people.”

“Are you insane, Sarah? You know I don’t want to be around this family!”

“Caroline, the duke and duchess are really nice people, and they extended an invitation to us. It’s a real honour to be invited to anything by a duchess.”

Now Caroline knew why Sarah hadn’t said anything. She knew that Caroline would refuse outright to come along. And for good reason. Why would she be around people she despised?

Sarah sighed.

“Look, I know you’ve had a bad interaction with the brothers ...”

“Just one brother,” Caroline reminded her.

“But it was twice, and it was years ago. Four years since you laid eyes on Henry. He’s a grown man. A decorated one, at that.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s a better person, Sarah.”

Sarah closed her eyes for a brief moment.

“Can’t you just see him with a different perspective?”

“Years pass, but the memories stay,” Caroline snapped. She sat back

and scowled. "I'm not going in."

"Don't embarrass me, Caroline."

"If you didn't want to be embarrassed, you shouldn't have brought me here under false pretences."

Sarah opened her eyes and pressed her lips together. Did she think this was going to work? She had to be mad to think Caroline would go along with this, especially with this deception. Caroline still hadn't forgotten the way Sarah stood up for Henry the night of the ball. She was still angry that she didn't have her friend on her side.

And now she was showing that she was putting a man over their friendship. Caroline hated it.

"Look, Caroline, I promised the duchess that I would come, and I didn't have anyone to go with me."

"That's not my problem, is it?"

Sarah sat forward.

"Stop behaving like a child! We're all uncomfortable at some point in our life. Don't believe life is a bed of roses." She held up two fingers. "Two hours, and then we can go. I'll do whatever you want after that."

“One hour.”

“An hour and a half.”

Caroline didn't want to be there that long, but the part of her that still valued their friendship was winning out. If the roles were reversed, Sarah would do it for her no matter her discomfort. It seemed a little hypocritical that she wouldn't do the same. She huffed.

“Fine. But if things go wrong, I'm blaming you.”

Sarah's eyes narrowed. Then she grabbed the door as the carriage stopped and jumped out, almost colliding with the footman who had come to open the door. She ignored him, stepping around and waiting for Caroline, looking anywhere but at her friend with a scowl. Caroline sighed. This was going to be a tough ninety minutes.

She climbed out and followed Sarah towards the front door, where they were met by the butler. He bowed low to them.

“Ladies. The Duchess of Cornwall said to take you through to the back terrace. If you will follow me.”

He headed off down the hall, Sarah following him. Caroline was about to fall in behind when she heard someone behind her.

“Lady Caroline.”

She turned and saw James leaning on the doorframe to another room, watching her with a lazy smile. He was very smartly dressed, his beard neatly trimmed. Caroline found herself smiling as she curtsied.

“Lord Beaufort. Good morning.”

“Why the frown just now?” James pushed himself upright and approached her. “You shouldn’t be frowning on such a beautiful day.”

“It’s not turning upside-down before you go any further.”

James chuckled.

“I’m sure I can change that.” He held out his arm. “Come with me. I’ll give you a tour of the house.”

That sounded like a nice idea. Caroline wasn’t prepared to go and meet the duchess’ friends. Even if she was a nice lady, Caroline knew everyone was aware of what happened between her and Henry. Things like that weren’t going to disappear so quickly, and everyone would be staring at her scar. Caroline had never felt so self-conscious.

“Lady Caroline?” James peered at her. “Are you all right? You’re staring at me, but you’re not really seeing me.”

“What? Oh.” Caroline shook herself. “I was ... well ... where’s your brother?”

“You want his company instead? Now I’m offended.”

“I just don’t want to bump into him, that’s all.”

James’ eyes glinted.

“Don’t worry; he’s outside with Mother. I think he’s charming the other ladies.”

Caroline couldn’t understand how anyone could like Henry. He wasn’t exactly likeable. Then again, he was a navy man, which women thought was attractive. And he was a good-looking man.

Did you just say he was good-looking? You’re supposed to hate him, not compliment him.

Caroline shoved her thoughts away and took James’ arm.

“Why don’t you show me around? I need some distraction.”

James looked very pleased as he headed through the house, showing Caroline each of the rooms. The duke’s house was far bigger than her

own, and Caroline felt tiny as she passed through the rooms. It was a wonder she could see any detail on the ceiling; they felt very high. It was certainly a grand house. Caroline had no idea how anyone could live in such a big home. Her house was big, but it was nothing like this, and it was comfortable. They had whatever they needed.

It felt like the duke and duchess had more rooms than they knew what to do with.

The final room James led her into seemed to be some sort of music room, although pretty much the only instrument was the beautiful grand piano near the open windows. Caroline ran her fingers along the smooth wood.

“This is just gorgeous.”

“I wouldn’t know about that. I don’t really play.” James leaned on the piano top. “My mother tried to get me into lessons, but I couldn’t. Henry’s the pianist in the family.”

“Henry plays the piano?”

That didn’t make sense. He did not look the type to play the piano well, if at all. James chuckled at Caroline’s expression.

“I know, it’s shocking, isn’t it? He’s got a surprisingly light touch. Maybe we should get him to play for us. That will have the ladies falling over themselves.”

“I think I’ll miss that.”

James peered at her curiously.

“You really don’t want anything to do with him, do you?”

“Is it that obvious?” Caroline gestured at her scar. “He scarred me for life. Do you think I should have anything to do with him?”

Something flickered in James’ eyes. But then he straightened up, and the flicker was gone.

“Well, I hope I can make you believe that I’m not like him.”

“I hope that’s the case, My Lord.”

“Trust me; you won’t be disappointed.” James grinned and came around the piano, offering his arm again. “Let’s get something to eat. The cook has made some delicious cake for tea. You should try it.”

That sounded like a good idea. Caroline let James lead her outside and towards the tea-table. It seemed to be laden with several types of cake, sausage rolls, and sandwiches. Caroline’s stomach growled at the sight, reminding her that she hadn’t eaten much at breakfast. James handed her a plate.

“Take your fill. I’m sure Mother won’t mind if you eat instead of talk.”

“Thank you.”

Caroline had her eyes on a chocolate cake in the middle of the table. That did look perfect. She reached for the knife, only to stop when she heard the sound of the piano. Someone was playing, the music floating through the doors and into the garden. Caroline had to listen. It was simply beautiful. The music itself was bittersweet, but the way it was played ...

Whoever was playing had a beautiful touch.

Caroline turned. One of the ladies had probably gone inside and decided to play around on the piano. But she froze when she saw the familiar back of Henry Beaufort sitting on the stool, his hands delicate on the keys. Sarah was leaning on the piano, listening to him with a rapt expression.

Now Caroline’s appetite had gone. Henry really could play the piano, but the knowledge that it was him made her go cold. She put the plate down.

“If you’ll excuse me, Lord Beaufort? I need to get some air.”

“But we’re already outside.”

“On my own.” Caroline dropped a quick curtsy. “I ... I just need to be alone.”

Then she hurried away, still hearing the sound of the piano in her head. He was a beautiful player. Such a light touch.

And that made Caroline hate him even more.

Chapter 8

“That’s just beautiful, Henry,” Sarah said as Henry took his fingers off the keys. “I didn’t know you could play like that.”

“You can’t exactly have a grand piano on a ship. It would more than likely be chopped up for firewood or blown to pieces during a battle.” Henry flexed his hands. He hadn’t played the piano in a while, and his fingers were sore already. “Mother wanted one of us to play. James couldn’t get his hands to work together, so it landed on me to do something about it. I think she believes that’s my only redeeming feature.”

“If she thinks that, then she doesn’t see the real man.”

Henry sighed.

“When I’m here, neither does anyone else.”

He was really regretting staying here. After James declared that they should make it a competition to see which of them Caroline would fall in love with first, Henry should have packed his things and gone to live elsewhere. He could rent a room in the city or shack up with one of his fellow sailors close to the docks. Anything to get away from his brother and his ridiculous plan. But he found that he couldn’t. Caroline didn’t deserve to be treated like a toy, and Henry couldn’t bring himself to leave and had James prey on Caroline Folton.

The problem was, he would have to deal with everyone treating him

like he had a short temper, and they were scared of talking to him too much in case it exploded. His mother's guests were already giving him nervous looks and were refusing to maintain eye contact. It was something of a relief that Sarah had arrived and greeted him warmly, although the ladies were watching with bemusement now.

James had really ruined Henry's reputation before he had a chance to build it up.

"I feel awful, Henry."

"Why?"

Sarah sighed.

"I just wish there was something I could do to help."

Henry gave her a smile and grasped her hand.

"You're too sweet, Sarah. There isn't really anything you can do. Once I'm back on the ship, I'll be gone. If I'm forced to have leave in the future, I'll just go elsewhere. I've saved up enough that I can afford my own place away from everyone."

He was not going to deal with being the outcast and treated like a bad person every time he came back to his childhood home. It was even worse with James being present. Their parents kept saying they needed to have that bond, and James needed to keep an eye on Henry.

Henry had given up protesting that he wasn't the one at fault; nobody listened.

Nobody except Sarah.

"I think I'm going to go for a walk." Henry got to his feet. "I don't really want to go back and sit with those ladies shuffling their chairs away from me."

"All right." Sarah pushed off the piano. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, I'll go on my own. I don't want you getting into trouble for wandering off with me alone."

"Don't care."

Henry gave a wry chuckle.

"You will if you're forced to marry me."

Sarah pouted.

"Am I that bad a prospect?"

Henry took her hand and kissed her fingers.

“I’m afraid you know it would make our friendship worse off. You deserve better.”

“I disagree, but I’ll concede.” Sarah shook her head with a frown. “There will be that one person who sees past the lies, Henry. You’ll find them eventually.”

Henry didn’t know how to answer that. He dropped Sarah’s hand and headed into the garden, crossing the grass towards the trees. His mother would tell him that it was rude to ignore the guests and wander off on his own, but they were her guests, not his. And he was a grown man; she shouldn’t be telling him off like he was a little boy.

Four years away from his family, and they still treated him like he was the redheaded stepchild. Henry had done dangerous things at sea, and he had risked his life for his country, and his parents barely recognised the medals he had been awarded. The only time he had written to them was to let them know that he was getting rewards and he wanted to see them. They never responded.

Henry knew there would be favourite children, but to have it so blatantly obvious was painful. James knew they would ignore his transgressions and would love him no matter what he did.

He really needed to keep his distance from James for the next few weeks. He was sure his brother would put the blame on him again. There was a chance that he would end up in serious trouble, and Henry would be the one who was targeted for being at fault. And Henry was fed up with it.

The trees and bushes thinned out around the path, and Henry came upon the large, ornate pond his father had someone build nearly twenty years ago. It was rather secluded, but there was something serene about it. Henry had found this spot to be the best place to hide whenever he needed to have a moment or two to himself. As a child, he had sneaked out of the house to sit by the pond after arguing with his family about things he had never done. It was calming, and Henry had ended up here all night on some occasions.

Strange, a pond was the only way he could calm down. It was probably why he took to the navy so well; he was at home with water.

But as he reached the pond, Henry could see that he wasn't alone. Caroline was there, sitting on one of the flat rocks, staring into the water. Henry slowed, his pulse missing a few beats. Sarah had said that she had brought Caroline along, but he hadn't expected to run into her. She was determined to keep out of his way. Given what she believed, that was understandable.

And it still hurt. Henry didn't want her to ignore him and treat him with contempt. He wanted to see her smile, hear her voice, and her laugh. Those were denied to him because of what she was led to believe.

It was hard to have strong feelings for a woman who wanted nothing to do with him.

Henry knew he should leave and let her have her peace. But this was meant to be his family home, his hideaway. He wasn't going to walk away. Picking up a pebble, he turned it over in his fingers as he reached the water's edge.

“Fed up with the party already?”

Caroline gasped. Henry glanced out the corner of his eyes and saw her eyes widening as she stared at him. Then they narrowed, and she scowled.

“You followed me out here, didn’t you?”

“I must disappoint you there. I didn’t know you were here.” Henry tossed the pebble into the water, watching it disappear under the surface. “I needed time alone, and this is where I come. It’s probably the only place where I can get any sort of peace.”

Caroline snorted.

“You need time alone? Really?”

“I don’t like gatherings like this. Never have. They put me on edge.”

“Is that why you’re always acting out and causing trouble? Because you’re bored?”

“Far from it.” Henry tapped the toe of his boot into the water and observed the ripples. “I’d rather be on a ship facing the French with fully loaded cannons than sit around in my best clothes talking about

subjects that don't interest me.”

Caroline snorted.

“You sound as reckless as you were as a child.”

“At least I don't have people judging me before I've had a chance to show what I'm like.”

“You think I'm judging you too early?”

“You already have.” Henry turned to her. “You're willing to believe the worst, and we only met twice before that ball.”

Caroline's eyes flashed. She pointed at the scar on her head, very visible through her hairline.

“You gave me this,” she snapped. Then she held up her hand and showed the jagged scar on her palm. “And this. And you say I've judged you too early?”

Henry fought back the knot in his stomach. He hated seeing those and knowing he hadn't been able to protect her properly. He took a deep breath, wishing that his anger wasn't rising. Caroline didn't deserve his anger.

“You don’t really know what happened that day. You just believe it because everyone immediately points the finger at me.”

“So I’m supposed to believe that James was the one who pushed me? Who shot at me? Why didn’t he own up to it if he was the one?”

“Why indeed?”

Caroline got to her feet and glared at him. Why did he have to think that she was pretty when she was angry?

“Don’t try and put it on your brother. He doesn’t deserve that.”

“And I deserve to be treated badly for not speaking up?” Henry shot back. “You have no idea how parents treat their children when you haven’t got any brothers or sisters.”

“I’m glad I’m an only child. Saves me having a brother like you.”

Henry folded his arms. He was between frustration, anger, and admiration. The admiration seemed to be winning out, and that didn’t make him happy.

“There are days when I wish I had a sister instead. Someone like you with a bit of fire and not afraid to speak her mind. That would make the days far more interesting.”

Caroline blinked. She seemed a little off-balance. Then she gathered herself and lifted her chin.

“You’re insane if you think I’d want to have a brother like you,” she said with a sneer.

“You would rather have James as a brother? He would have you looking over your shoulder, trust me.”

“Why are you so mean about your brother? You sound like you’re jealous.”

Henry snorted.

“I’ve got nothing to be jealous about.”

“Well, he is the favourite son and a hero.”

“So am I, but you don’t hear anyone talking about that because I’m the one everyone’s written off.” Henry narrowed his eyes. “Tell me, My Lady, did James tell you how many medals he’s won for being brave in battle? Does he talk about his soldier exploits?”

“He doesn’t have to. I know he’s a hero.”

“And I’m not because you don’t like me. Which means I can’t possibly be a hero.” Henry saw the waver in Caroline’s eyes. He had hit a little closer to the mark than he expected, and that made him feel wounded. “Why don’t you go and talk to Lady Lakeford about the time she witnessed me receive a medal for bravery after I saved her brother in the middle of a battle? Did she make that up, do you think?”

Caroline snorted.

“I don’t know what magic wand you waved over her, but it’s not going to work with me.”

“No, it won’t. Because you’re too rigid.” Caroline flinched, but Henry was too annoyed to stop. “What happened to being open-minded?”

“I am open-minded.”

“No, you’re not.” His favourite place was now being tainted by this woman. Henry turned away. “Thank you for making me realise that I’m not worthy of redeeming myself. And how narrow-minded you really are. James is welcome to you.”

“What did you say?”

“I’m sure you heard me, My Lady.” Henry walked around the pond. “I’m going for a walk. The company is getting worse than I thought.”

He didn’t wait for Caroline to reply, disappearing through the trees. It

was hard to be in the presence of a woman he had admired for so long and know that she was never going to see him as anything but the boy who hurt her.

James was taking her away without even realising it. And Henry hated it.

#

Caroline couldn't believe that Henry had followed her to corner her privately. She didn't believe that his finding her was a coincidence. He had to have been following her.

But the way he spoke had surprised her. Henry hadn't been on the attack and called her names until right at the end when he accused her of being narrow-minded. He had actually said she had some fire and, in his way, had said he liked that she had no problem speaking her mind. But to call her narrow-minded after that? It felt like he had hated complimenting her.

However, it wasn't that which gave Caroline pause. It was the bitterness, the pain in his face. Henry thought he wasn't showing anything, but Caroline could see it. He hated that no one was giving him a chance. What did he expect after everything that happened in the past?

It was only twice. How do you know these weren't isolated incidents? What happened with making up your own mind about people?

I don't need to rethink Henry Beaufort. He's a bad man.

Even so, the way he turned to stone when Caroline pushed him and then stormed off said there was more going on than that. Caroline didn't know what to think, but she wasn't about to feel any sympathy for this man. He didn't deserve that from her.

Not after what he had done.

If Henry was going to be out here, Caroline wasn't. She made her way through the trees and headed back into the main garden. The guests were congregating around the terrace, using parasols to keep the sun off their faces. But Caroline didn't want to go anywhere near them. If they saw Henry leaving the group, they had to know that Caroline had encountered him. She wasn't about to deal with people making suggestive comments. Even if they didn't, she was going to be on edge waiting for the questions.

She needed to go.

Sarah was standing by the tea-table talking to one of the maids clearing up the dirty plates. She saw Caroline and put her plate aside.

"I was wondering where you'd gone. Are you all right?"

"I want to leave." Caroline didn't stop as she went towards the house.
"Now."

"What?" Sarah hurried after her. "You're going now? We agreed on an

hour and a half, remember?”

“You think I can manage an hour and a half after encountering Lord Bannock already? I’m leaving.”

Caroline knew she was being rude, but she didn’t care. Being around Henry was leaving her off-balance. Her heart was still racing from being in his presence, and it felt like her corset had been tightened more than it should have. Why was she reacting in such a way about the man? She didn’t know what was going on, but she didn’t like it.

She would rather feel nothing for this man. It would make things a lot easier.

She should have left as soon as she realised what was going on.

“Caroline!” Sarah caught up with her as they entered the foyer, grabbing her arm to make her stop. “What happened? What did you and Henry say to each other?”

“Are you trying to suggest that I said something out of turn?”

“Considering your animosity right now, yes.”

Caroline growled and yanked her arm away.

“He’s a thug, Sarah. A bully. And he thinks he can push blame onto his brother. That’s not a man. That’s a coward. I wouldn’t be surprised if he faked getting his medals that I saw on his jacket at the ball.”

Sarah gasped.

“How could you say that? I was present for one of them! My father was the one who presented the medal. Do you want to doubt what I saw?”

“No, of course not ...”

Sarah cut her off with a sharp swipe of her hand.

“Just because you think the worst about Henry Beaufort doesn’t mean he’s a bad person. I happen to know he’s a good man. A decent one. And everyone has ignored him for years because James is the favoured son.”

“He was ignored because he was a bad person, Sarah!”

“That’s because nobody listened! It wasn’t because he’s a bad person! That’s just ridiculous.” Sarah was breathing heavily now, her cheeks flushed. “If you’re going to be such a brat about this ...”

“What?” Caroline stared. “Did you just call me a brat?”

“Yes, I did! And you hear me out before you scoff.” Sarah folded her arms. “You know every time I’ve seen Henry since he’s come back, he’s asked how you were? What were you up to? Whenever you came into sight at the ball, he couldn’t take his eyes off you. He’s genuinely interested in how you’ve been getting on.”

That threw Caroline a little. But she pushed her bewilderment aside.

“Asking about me makes you think he’s genuine in wanting to know me, does it?”

“I think it does. I remember when we were talking before, back when we were getting acquainted. There was a suggestion that Henry and I should get married as that would be beneficial for both of us. Henry politely turned my father’s suggestion down, saying that he couldn’t give me his full attention when his heart was with someone else, and it would be unfair to me. He wouldn’t elaborate except that it was someone from his childhood.”

It took a moment for the penny to drop and for Caroline to realise what her friend was saying. Her mouth dropped open.

“And you think that means he’s in love with me? Really, Sarah?”

“I wouldn’t say love just yet.” Sarah shook her head. “But he certainly has strong feelings for you, and I wouldn’t discard him so quickly because of your perceived opinions.”

“Perceived opinions?” Caroline snorted. “That’s what I really think.

How could he be in love with me after we've only met twice."

"You decided on him after one encounter! And an unfair one, as well. What's to say that didn't happen to him as well?"

Caroline hated to admit it, but Sarah did have a point. If she could have such a strong opinion on someone after one meeting, so could anyone else. But to say that Henry might have fallen for her at eleven years old when he cut her head open? If that was love, he had a very strange way of showing it.

She wanted no part of it, even as it made her stomach flutter at the thought.

"It will never happen, Sarah."

"How do you know if you don't try?" Sarah shot back.

"I know what happened that day. And I can't put this in the past."

"Do you really know what happened? Or do you think you know?"

Was she doubting Caroline's word? Did she seriously think Caroline was lying about what happened? She knew what had occurred and knew who was to blame. If Sarah was going to defend the man who had scarred Caroline for life, she was throwing their friendship away.

"I don't have to hear this." Caroline turned and headed towards the front door, which was already open for her. "I'm taking your carriage home. This is not something I want to carry on."

"So, you're going to run away instead of confronting it?" Sarah stormed after her. "You both deserve to know the truth."

"I know the truth, Sarah. If Lord Bannock can't accept it, that's on him. And stop trying to push us together, Sarah, or we might not end up being friends anymore."

"Caroline ..."

But Caroline was already out of the door. Then she realised the carriage was going to take a while to get ready. She would be hovering on the threshold for a while and anyone could come upon her. She didn't want to talk to anyone, especially not Sarah.

It was only next to her home. And it wasn't far to walk. So, Caroline headed down the drive towards the main road. It was a very long drive and certainly very winding, but it was better than waiting in the sun for a carriage that might not even get to her if Sarah managed to stop it.

As Caroline walked, she focused on her breathing and trying to ease the tightness in her chest. She didn't know whether to scream or burst into tears. Being around Henry Beaufort was bad enough, but to have her friend defend him and call her a brat really hurt. Sarah had always been on her side. She had defended her against other people, especially those who kept making remarks about the scar. Her friend had been at her side.

To have her turn around and defend Henry instead felt like a slap in the face. How could she think it was all right to do that? Why did she believe Henry's story over Caroline's? Whatever spell Henry had cast was still strong. Sarah's weakness was certainly Henry Beaufort and his belief that he was the wrong party.

Even as she stormed home, there was a niggling part of her that wondered if things were as simple as they were made out to be. Was there something else going on here? Was she missing something?

Caroline pushed that away. No, she wasn't missing something. She knew what had happened, and it wasn't going to stop because someone she thought was her friend was putting doubts into her head. She needed to stay strong.

Henry Beaufort, Lord Bannock, didn't deserve to have her presence. And she could breathe better when he wasn't around.

Chapter 9

“I don’t know how you talked me into this,” Caroline grumbled as she urged her horse up the slight slope. Pegasus grunted at the change in direction, but she went up without further fuss. Sarah sighed, following her friend up on her own horse.

“Look, Lord Beaufort invited both of us to go riding with him today. It’s something we can’t turn down, not without appearing rude.”

“Yes, but ...”

“Don’t argue, Caroline.” Sarah reached the top of the slope as Caroline did and nudged her horse forward, brushing her hair out of her eyes. “It’s been four days since you left the house, and you are looking pale. You need some fresh air, and Lord Beaufort did extend this to both of us.”

Caroline scowled.

“I’m not pale. I’m perfectly fine. Pale skin is beauty, remember?”

“Not when you’re as white as a sheet. You look like you’re about to keel over.” Sarah shook her head. “It’s cooler than it was a few days ago, so this would be a good activity for both of us.”

She did have a point. It was a really nice day, but it wasn’t as bad as it

had been for the tea party. And Caroline did love to go riding. This would be a good opportunity to go out on Pegasus and try and clear her head.

Just as long as they didn't bump into Henry. Caroline knew that James and his brother were at odds already, but she wouldn't put it past James to bring Henry along to make up a foursome. Caroline didn't want to be around Henry at all, not when she was still left flustered from their last interaction.

It was four days ago, and she was still affected by it, remembering Henry standing tall and stern by that pond, looking at her with those eyes that seemed to look right inside her.

Why was he having such an effect on her? Caroline didn't like it.

There was a horse up ahead, a man astride its back. With his back to them, Caroline thought it was Henry. She started to panic. No, she shouldn't be here. She should be going the other way. But then the man turned to face them, and Caroline realised it was James. She relaxed. At least she would be able to tell them apart with James sporting a fine beard.

Then again, even if he were clean-shaven, she would still be able to tell them apart. Henry was more muscular, carried himself well, and looked like he worked hard for the last four years. James looked fine, but he was slimmer and seemed to prefer going around dressed up in the richest finery. Henry was not like that. He looked uncomfortable wearing his best clothes.

I wonder what he would look like working on a ship wearing a simple shirt and breeches. Maybe the shirt is not always buttoned ...

Stop it!

She had to be going mad if she was starting to think like this. Caroline shoved thoughts of Henry in an unbuttoned shirt aside as she and Sarah reached James. James took off his hat and gave them a half-bow.

“Lady Caroline. Lady Lakeford. It’s an honour to have you here.”

“I wouldn’t call it an honour, but thank you for inviting us.” Sarah’s horse snorted, and she leaned over to pat its neck. “Just so you know, My Lord, I’m not as confident a rider as Lady Caroline, so please don’t go too mad with our riding.”

James gave her a lopsided smile.

“Don’t worry about it, Lady Lakeford. I’m not going to do that. You’ll be fine.”

“I hope so.”

Lady Caroline shook her head with a smile.

“There’s nothing wrong with a bit of fun, Sarah.” She nudged Pegasus into motion. “Come on.”

Sarah started muttering.

“I have a feeling you and I are going to have different opinions regarding fun.”

Caroline ignored her. While she still saw Sarah as a friend, that friendship was strained. She wouldn't be surprised if it broke completely if Sarah kept defending Henry. How could Caroline keep someone in her life who took the side of the man who hurt her badly enough that the hatred was still strong?

But do you hate Lord Bannock? Because from the way you've been thinking about him says that you don't really hate him as much as you believe.

Of course I hate him.

Then why do you consider him attractive?

Caroline gritted her teeth. She hated that her mind had been in a mess since Henry had come back into her life. She just couldn't get rid of him, physically or in her head. This was a man she should be kicking back to his ship. And yet, even when she wanted to be anywhere but in his presence, there was something about him that kept her holding on. A sadness. That was surprising. What did he have to be sad about?

Henry Beaufort was taking up too much space in her head. That

needed to stop.

“How about a race?”

“Hmm?”

James had drawn up beside her, giving her a mischievous grin.

“You and me, let’s race. Down the slope to where the river is, and then we can wait for the stragglers.”

Caroline thought about it for a moment. She could race on a horse, even side-saddle, but the ground was a little soft. If Pegasus came down the wrong way, both of them would go flying. But the thought of having a race and distracting herself from her messy thoughts sounded too tempting. She grinned and nodded.

“All right.”

James beamed.

“Excellent. Let’s go!”

Before Caroline could react, he took off down the slope. Cheat, he didn’t wait for her! Caroline flicked her reins and started off after him. She could hear Sarah shouting behind her, but she ignored her. Sarah

could complain all she wanted; Caroline wasn't going to listen.

She was going to catch James and beat him.

The slope downwards was a gentle one, not as bad as she thought. Caroline could tell the ground was a little soft, but Pegasus was keeping her footing. She bent over the reins and urged her to go faster. Pegasus could ride like the wind, and she was lighter. She would be able to catch up to James easily.

Just a little more, and then they would be alongside.

Suddenly, Pegasus slipped and neighed loudly. Before Caroline knew what was happening, she could feel herself falling. Fast. The world was tilting and turning into a blur, and she could see the ground coming up fast towards her. She screamed.

She hit the ground with her shoulder, her head bouncing off the grass. The pain in her head was then obliterated by the pain in her leg as Pegasus came down as well, landing hard on her. Something ripped through her knee, and Caroline screamed again. Pegasus snorted and wriggled for a moment, and then she was getting to her feet, standing there with an expression that said she wasn't happy.

Caroline wished she could get up herself. But she couldn't. Her leg was in agony, especially around her knee. She wanted to curl into a ball and get away from the pain, but she couldn't bend her leg.

"Caroline!"

Caroline heard horses approaching and then footsteps. Moments later, Sarah fell to her knees by her friend, her hair falling over her white face.

“Oh, my God! Caroline!”

“Is ...” Caroline swallowed. She was trying to fight back the tears, but it was getting harder. “Is my leg broken?”

“Don’t worry about that for now.” Sarah stroked Caroline’s head. “Just take a moment. You hit your head pretty hard.”

Caroline was more concerned about her leg, but the moment she tried to get her head off the ground, she felt like she would be sick. She moaned and flopped back onto the grass.

“I guess that ground was softer than I expected,” she said weakly.

“Try not to stop, Caroline. Lord Beaufort! Help!”

Caroline managed to turn her head to see James trotting up towards them, looking to be in no hurry at all. Then he got down and strolled over. Why wasn’t he quicker? He had to have seen what happened, surely?

“What happened?”

“Pegasus slipped and fell.” Caroline swallowed back the bile. “I think I broke my leg.”

“I see.” James knelt beside her. “Let’s have a look.”

Before either woman could stop him, James took hold of Caroline’s skirts and shoved them up. Caroline gasped, but she couldn’t push her skirts back down. They were up far too high. Sarah gasped and slapped James across the face.

“Lord Beaufort, how dare you? That’s highly inappropriate!”

“You think I shouldn’t check for injuries?” James demanded.

“Not like that!” Sarah adjusted the skirts until they were just above Caroline’s knee. “You don’t need to bare her to the world to know that she’s got an injury to her leg. There was no need for that.”

James glared at her, his face red where Sarah had slapped him. Caroline normally didn’t want to resort to violence, but she was glad Sarah had stuck up for her. She wasn’t comfortable having the most intimate part of her body revealed to her friend, never mind a gentleman. James had to know that.

Sarah leaned over and winced.

“From the shape of your leg, it’s not broken, but your knee is looking swollen. And there’s a gash on the inside of your knee.”

“I probably caught a buckle on the way down.” Caroline was surprised she could actually talk. She didn’t know if she should be sick, cry, or scream.

“That looks nasty.” James still sounded grumpy. “We’re going to need to get you to the physician.”

Caroline couldn’t agree more. She just wanted to go home.

#

“How are things going for you at home?” Bingham asked.

Henry sighed and turned away from the window. The view from Bingham’s study was certainly a fabulous one.

“It’s not good, if I’m honest, My Lord.” He rubbed a hand over his face. “I just want to go back to sea. At least I don’t get into trouble for someone else’s mistakes.”

At sea, there wasn’t anywhere to run, and Henry had had his fair share of taking punishment he didn’t deserve as a child. As a grown man, he wouldn’t stand for it. If only his family would do the same as his fellow seafarers.

“Oh, dear.” Bingham sat back in his chair, putting down his pen as he watched the young man. “Are they still going through with their decision to disinherit you?”

“I think they are. I haven’t heard anything since I overheard them, but apparently, everyone in the county seems to know what my father wants.”

Not that Henry really cared. He saw it as less pressure on him once the title was off him. As far as he was concerned, he was Lieutenant Beaufort. That made him feel more at home than Lord Bannock. His father said he should remember his title and where he came from. Henry was painfully aware of it, but the decision to be a naval man instead of a nobleman was something he didn’t take lightly.

His parents were more than likely regretting sending him off to the navy now. It was meant to be a punishment. Instead, Henry had found his peace and discovered where he could be his own person.

Bingham shook his head with a sigh.

“Your parents are like enigmas to me.”

“How so?”

“They don’t see the person you actually are. It’s a shame you get treated so badly because of a choice you made as a child.”

Henry shrugged.

“I’m used to it.”

“That doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt.”

He did have a point. Henry hadn’t thought about it much while he was away, mostly because he had more important things on his mind. At that point, he had just gone numb to knowing that his family would never see him as a worthy son. The fact he had been promoted to lieutenant and was not far off from buying his own ship and having his own crew didn’t appear to have been acknowledged. Henry had tried to tell his father about it, but the duke was not interested. He had pretty much dismissed his own son.

It was something Henry had been used to for fifteen years. But he did wish that his father would look at him, realise his accomplishments, and say that he was proud of him. That was not going to happen. And Henry hated it.

“God,” he crossed the room and picked up his glass, “I can’t wait to go back. My superiors have become more of a family than my own family ever was.”

“Which is admirable on their part, but it still sounds sad to hear.” Bingham tilted his head to one side. “Would an apology from your parents help and start mending a bridge?”

“What good will that do, My Lord? They don’t believe anything that comes out of my mouth anymore.” Henry took a swig of his whisky, the drink burning his mouth. “Your daughter doesn’t.”

“Maybe you should tell her the truth.”

“She’s not going to listen to me.”

Caroline had her own narrative, and Henry knew he wouldn’t be able to get through. That hurt more than knowing his parents wouldn’t treat him like a son, which left Henry feeling glum. It would be just his luck that he found a woman attractive, and she wanted nothing to do with him.

“You can try. You won’t know until you actually sit her down – if she’ll stay still long enough.” Bingham sat forward. “Or I could say something in your place.”

“Please don’t, My Lord. I know Lady Lakeford has tried, and Caroline has lost her temper. She’s made up her mind, and I’m not going to change it.”

“Even if it’s hurting both of you?”

Henry looked away. He had come to Bingham’s estate because the older man had asked for his company and advice on some business ventures involving shipping. This wasn’t meant to be Bingham trying to advise him about approaching Caroline regarding her animosity towards him.

He had also been promised that Caroline would not be there as someone else invited her out. Henry didn't need to ask who she had gone with; James had told him he was going out riding with Caroline, practically gloating about it over the breakfast table. Henry had ignored him, but their parents had been very interested.

Lady Cornwall even talked about possible wedding bells in the future, which did have Henry sitting up in alarm. James and Caroline? That was a disaster waiting to happen. How did James expect to be married to Caroline and her not find out what he did to her in the past?

Hopefully, she wouldn't want anything to do with James, either. Henry silently prayed that would happen. Caroline deserved better than James Beaufort.

She deserves better than me. And that's what makes this worse.

"What on earth's going on out there?"

"Hmm?"

Bingham was staring out the window. He got to his feet and went over, almost pressing his face up against the glass. Then he stiffened and started running towards the door.

"Dear God!"

“What’s wrong?”

Henry hurried to the window in time to see Sarah helping Caroline off her horse, both women almost collapsing to the ground. Two footmen appeared and took one of Caroline’s arms each before helping her limp inside.

Limp? Then Henry saw the blood on her skirts.

His heart was in his mouth as he ran out of the room towards the back of the house. He caught up with Bingham as Caroline was helped into the library. Her face was pale, and she looked like she had been crying.

“Good God, Caroline!” Bingham ran to his daughter. “What happened?”

“I ... we ...”

Caroline whimpered and almost fell to her knees. The footmen kept her upright, and Bingham helped them to put his daughter onto the settee. Caroline lay there, hands over her face. Henry could hear the sobs.

What on earth had James done now?

“Sarah?” Bingham turned to Sarah, who was standing in the doorway with an equally pale face. “What happened?”

“Lord ...” Sarah swallowed. “Lord Beaufort and Caroline were racing each other. Caroline’s horse lost its footing, and both horse and rider fell.” She gestured at the blood on Caroline’s dress. “Pegasus landed on Caroline’s leg, but something ripped her flesh open. The wound’s pretty bad.”

Henry felt light-headed. James had done it again. He seemed intent on finding different ways to harm Caroline whenever they were around each other.

“And where is my brother?” he growled.

Caroline froze. She lowered her hands and started to sit up, her eyes widening when she saw him.

“Lord Bannock, what ...?” She broke off with a moan and fell back again with a sob.

“What am I doing here? Your father and I were discussing business.” Henry glowered at Sarah. “Where’s my brother now? Why isn’t he with you?”

“He ... he went to get the physician. Said it would be faster to get Caroline home, and he would get Dr Preston.”

“He’s going to be searching forever, then,” Bingham said with a grunt. “He’s gone to Oxford for a conference. Won’t be back until tomorrow.”

Caroline groaned. Henry hated seeing her like this. His heart hurt to see her in so much pain. He stepped forward.

“I can treat her.”

Everyone turned to stare at him. Bingham blinked.

“You ... you will?”

“There were times when I had to help out the surgeon when I first started on the ships. I know how to clean and dress a wound.” Henry fixed a stare on Bingham. “If you’ll allow it, My Lord? I’ll have a witness here, so you don’t have to worry about your daughter.”

Bingham didn’t even hesitate. He nodded.

“I’ll allow it. Frances, you stay here. Sarah, I want you to go into the town and find Lady Bingham. Let her know about Caroline’s injuries. Hartley, help with the horses.”

One of the footmen left by the terrace doors, and Sarah disappeared right behind him. Bingham headed towards the door, muttering under his breath. Henry half-expected Bingham to stay with him, so he was surprised that the man was leaving.

Then he was left with Caroline. Even with a footman here, Henry felt uncomfortable. Caroline watched him warily.

“There’s no need for this ...” she protested, but Henry cut her off.

“There is every need.” Taking a deep breath, Henry knelt beside her. “Now, I’m going to need to look at your knee. You can lift your skirts to how you want them. I won’t touch them unless you give me permission. Can you do that for me?”

Caroline glared at him. For a moment, he thought she would refuse and tell him to get out, but instead, she started to slowly gather her skirts up her legs, staring at the ceiling with flushed cheeks. Henry felt a knot tightening low in his belly, and then his trousers started feeling like they were more snug than normal. How was it possible that the showing of a lady’s leg could be so erotic?

Then he saw the gash in her knee and his arousal vanished. It wasn’t big, just down the inside of her leg, but it did look deep. Henry looked up at the footman.

“Could you get some hot water and some cloths? And ask the housekeeper if she has any needle and thread as well.”

“What?” Caroline squeaked as the footman hurried away. “Needle and thread?”

“You might need stitches to close the wound.” Henry tried not to stare

at her knees. Even with the blood and the wound, he couldn't help noticing that her legs were very shapely. "I won't know until I clean it, though."

Caroline didn't look very happy about that. She pursed her lips, her hands tightening in her skirts. Henry noticed that she didn't lower them to cover her legs. Odd.

Knowing that he was far too close and there was no one to witness them, Henry got up and went to another chair, where he sat down with his elbows on his knees. Caroline frowned.

"Why did you move?"

"Because there's no one else in the room, Lady Caroline." Henry raised his eyebrows. "It's your reputation I'm protecting. I may be a lot of things, but I'm not about to molest you. We just need to wait for your servant to come back."

Something passed across Caroline's face very briefly. Then she huffed and lay back, pushing her skirts back into place with a flinch.

"Fine."

Henry stared at the floor. If he stared at Caroline, he was going to end up with his arousal climbing again. It didn't help that he could still clearly remember her shapely legs.

He should have asked Bingham to stay. Then Henry might be able to have a clear head.

James had a lot to answer for. What was he playing at, being such a reckless rider? He was supposed to know how to behave in these situations, and he just ended up being stupid. Now Caroline was hurt for a third time because James was doing things his way.

At least she's alive. It could have been worse.

I don't want to think about that.

Chapter 10

“Are you comfortable, Caroline?” Sarah asked as she adjusted the pillows under Caroline’s knee. “That’s not too much, is it?”

“Yes, thank you, Sarah.” Caroline could feel herself tilting backwards with her leg going higher, so she adjusted the pillows behind her to stop herself from tipping off the settee. “I don’t think I’ll be doing much today.”

“After what happened, you don’t need to.” Sarah moved to sit at the table nearby, adjusting her hat and picking up her parasol. “Just relax and enjoy the outdoors.”

Caroline planned to. At least it was a nice day. She didn’t really need to do anything except let her leg recover. Pegasus had landed hard on her leg, but thankfully nothing was broken. However, the bruises that had come up on her leg, from her ankle to mid-thigh, made things very interesting. Caroline had never seen anything like it. Trying to bend her leg was difficult, and she had to fight back the tears when she had no choice but to bend her knee.

Getting down the stairs had been fun. And not something Caroline wanted to do again in a hurry. Maybe she could ask for one of the footmen to carry her up and down the stairs in the future until she was able to walk. Not exactly dignified, but it was less painful.

It’s a pity you can’t ask Henry Beaufort to carry you. I’m sure he would jump at the chance to do that.

No! He'd only drop me down the stairs.

Are you sure about that?

Caroline adjusted her skirts, gingerly checking her knee through the fabric. She was very surprised that Henry had offered to treat her, and he had been very professional and brisk about it. He didn't stare at her; he didn't touch her unless he had to, and when he did, it was very gentle. Caroline hadn't expected that, nor did she expect to feel how rough his hands were. It was at that point she noticed that he wasn't wearing gloves. Surely, that was inappropriate?

Then she remembered that her skirts were above her knees in front of a gentleman and realised she was being ridiculous.

Henry had worked quickly, cleaning her knee before saying she needed to have stitches to close the wound. Caroline had wanted to run away at that point – she remembered the last time she got stitches – but it was either that or the wound could get infected. Henry had talked her through it as he threaded the needle and got to work.

He didn't stop talking, speaking about practically anything. Even if it was strange and made Caroline wonder if he had taken something that was making him confused. But it did its job. Henry kept her distracted enough that he could put the neat stitches into her knee and was wrapping a bandage around her leg before Caroline realised he had finished.

"How is your knee?" Sarah asked, adjusting the parasol to block out the sun. "Are the stitches tugging? I know you said you're not comfortable with them."

“Actually, they’re doing fine.” Caroline found herself smiling and fought it back. “I will say this about Lord Bannock; he could really make a living as a surgeon. Even Dr Preston was impressed when he checked earlier.”

“I see.”

“What?”

Sarah looked away quickly.

“Nothing.”

Caroline frowned.

“Sarah, just because I’m complimenting his skills as a homemade surgeon doesn’t mean I’m going to forgive him for everything.”

“Oh, no. Of course not.” Sarah’s mouth twitched. “You’re too rigid for that.”

“You know, you’re not the first person to call me that.”

“At least I’m not the only one who’s noticed.”

Caroline looked away, checking that her parasol, which was tied to the end of the chaise, was not going to fall over anytime soon. She wasn’t about to tell Sarah that Henry was the one who had called her rigid. She was beginning to wonder if he was right.

Henry had really grown up in the last four years. Caroline had not expected such kindness as he tended to her. He didn’t need to, especially to someone horrible to him. But he had, and Caroline had to admit that she appreciated it. If he had said he would leave her to bleed out and walk away, she would have been angry, but she wouldn’t have blamed him. It would be understandable.

She had lain in bed at night thinking about that half an hour before her leg was fully tended to, and they were joined by Bingham and Sarah. There had been no animosity on either side. Caroline was too much in pain to be angry, and Henry seemed to have that far from his mind. Despite the situation, it was actually ... pleasant. Caroline had not expected that to happen.

Then again, she didn’t expect James Beaufort to be so callous about seeing her legs – and almost more than that – before saying he would get Dr Preston and completely disappear. She had no idea where he was now, but the fact he had left them to go back to Caroline’s home without escorting them and then not checking on her was concerning. Caroline had thought he was the nicer brother, but now her opinions were beginning to shift.

Had she been misled about which brother was the bad one? Because the actions of both brothers yesterday made her question it. But if James was the bad one and Henry was just the scapegoat, why was everyone so staunchly under the belief James couldn’t do anything wrong? The only one who seemed to be on Henry’s side was Sarah.

And her father. Caroline had noticed that Bingham had stood up for Henry the day before. When her mother arrived home, she had been shocked that Caroline had been hurt. Henry was still present, but he was in the process of leaving, and before anyone could stop her, Lady Bingham had turned on him and demanded to know what he had done. It took everyone in the room to make her realise that Henry was the one who had actually helped. She had calmed down, but Caroline knew her mother was still under the impression Henry had done something wrong.

Even Caroline knew that was unfair. She had been present, and she knew who was in the wrong. Henry Beaufort certainly kept himself in the clear.

She dreaded to think what Lady Bingham would have said if she had found out Henry was the one who stitched Caroline up, meaning that he saw her bare legs. She would have had a hit, for sure.

A shiver went down Caroline's spine as she recalled sitting on the settee with her skirts above her knees while Henry tended to her wound. He was a gentleman, keeping his eyes firmly on what he was doing, and Frances, the footman, had been there, but it still felt very intimate. His touch had made Caroline feel like she was being touched everywhere that he shouldn't be touching.

She should have objected. Instead, Caroline found herself wanting more.

The fall had made her hit her head. That had to be the reason she was behaving oddly.

“Caroline, dear.”

Caroline looked around. Her mother was crossing the terrace towards her, a huge bouquet of roses in her arms. Caroline stared. She had never seen a bouquet that big.

“Goodness, Mother? Who on earth are they from?”

“Lord Beaufort, the note said.” Lady Bingham held up a letter, passing the flowers to Sarah without looking, causing Sarah almost to drop her parasol. “I’ll read it to you.”

“Mother, I can do it myself.”

“Nonsense! You’re hurt!”

“I hurt my leg, Mother, not my tongue.”

Although Caroline wasn’t sure she wanted to read James’ explanation for disappearing like he did. She tried to reach for the letter, but Lady Bingham walked away from her as she opened it.

“Dear Lady Caroline. I hope you can forgive me for leaving you as I did. I thought you were going to be at my estate, and I must have missed you. Unfortunately, I could not find the physician, but I was informed on my return that you had been treated appropriately and

were going to be fine after some rest. That is a relief.” Lady Bingham looked at her daughter. “Again, I must apologise for what happened, and please accept these roses as an apology. Also, I’d like to invite you to dinner at my home on Sunday when you’re feeling better. Mother would be delighted to meet you properly. Let me know if that sounds agreeable to you. Lord Beaufort.’ Well, isn’t that sweet?”

Caroline wasn’t sure if she could call it sweet. Especially when she was still upset with James disappearing like he did. He was lying when he thought they were at his estate; he knew exactly where they were going. He had deserted them. Not the sign of a gentleman.

“You know,” Lady Bingham said as she folded the letter and put it on the table by the flowers Sarah had put down, “This might turn into an advantageous move for you.”

Caroline frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a way to get a husband, isn’t it?”

“You ...” Sarah stared. “You think this might end up with a marriage at the end?”

“Why not? Lord Beaufort is clearly interested in my daughter, and he sent over red roses. You know that means he has a deep admiration for you, Caroline.”

“Or he doesn’t know about the language of flowers.” Caroline peered at the huge bouquet. “That’s more than likely with Lord Beaufort.”

Also, the idea of getting married to a man who had ignored her and ran away when she needed help didn’t inspire confidence in having a husband around when she needed him. James Beaufort might be attractive, and he may be charming, but his actions spoke volumes.

“I think he would be a good match for you.” Lady Bingham went on. She wrinkled her nose. “Better than his brother, certainly.”

Caroline felt herself stiffen. Before she could say something, Sarah spoke up sharply.

“I prefer Lord Bannock,” she said coldly. “He’s not as everyone believes, Lady Bingham. My father knows him, and our family likes him.”

Lady Bingham sniffed.

“Your father needs to adjust his judgement of people.”

Caroline could see that Sarah was about to lose her temper and tried to catch her eye.

“Sarah ...” she began, but Sarah ignored her, focusing on Lady Bingham.

“I trust Father’s judgement. As an admiral, he takes his time to know people behind a name. He needs to know who he can trust to keep the other man alive and safe. Lord Bannock is a brave man. He’s done a lot for this country, and all people can do is be horrible about him. It’s not fair that he should have that follow him the rest of his life.”

“He’s got a bad temper, Lady Lakeford. He’s also disrespectful to everyone, and he’s known to lie. How does he think he can redeem himself from that?”

Sarah snorted. Caroline couldn’t believe that her friend was actually doing this. Sarah was normally quiet and kept away from any type of argument. She watched as her friend drew up to her feet and fixed Lady Bingham with a cool stare.

“Maybe you and everyone around us were seeing things that others wanted you to see. Maybe Lord Bannock was trying to tell everyone the truth, and nobody believed him. I wouldn’t be surprised if he were discarded because of one simple mistake many years ago, and that made him pay the price.”

Lady Bingham looked like she was going to lose her temper. Caroline could see her cheeks becoming very flushed. She tried to signal Sarah to stop, but Lady Bingham turned to her daughter.

“Caroline, dear, I know you wanted a friend here with you, but I want Lady Lakeford to leave. She’s speaking out of turn.”

“Oh, am I? Then I’ll keep doing it.” Sarah pointed at Caroline. “Do you

know who it was who treated Caroline's knee? Who got her to calm down and settle enough to get cleaned up? Who made sure she was comfortable? Lord Bannock." Caroline winced as her mother gasped. "They were never left alone, and he treated her with the kindness and gentleness that I've seen him use many times before. He's not a bad person. People are willing to believe anything because it means confronting reality. And the reality is Lord Bannock is a better man than anyone thought. He rose above unfair judgement, and he's still spoken badly about. How is that fair?"

Lady Bingham bared her teeth, her eyes flashing.

"Get out." She hissed. "Now."

"I'm going." Sarah snatched up her parasol. "Now I know where your daughter got her unfair opinion about Lord Bannock."

And with that, she stormed inside. Lady Bingham scoffed as Sarah disappeared from sight.

"Oh, how rude! I don't know why you're friends with her."

Caroline didn't respond. After that outburst, she was beginning to wonder why Sarah was still friends with her. She was the one who didn't deserve the woman who had just walked out.

"I'm surprised that you're coming with me this evening," Caroline commented as she was helped out of the carriage, flinching as she put a little pressure on her leg.

"Well, Lord Bingham said that I was the most appropriate chaperone." Sarah alighted after her, adjusting her shawl about her shoulders. "Although I know your mother argued against it."

"She hasn't stopped complaining about it, even though it was two days ago Father made the decision." Caroline reached out and squeezed her friend's arm. "But I'm glad it's you here with me instead of her."

"Are you?"

Sarah looked sceptical. Caroline hated that their friendship was shaky right now, and she didn't want that.

"I really am. I feel better knowing that you're here."

Caroline did mean that. She did feel better having Sarah around, even if they were currently at odds. And Caroline knew she could relax a little more with her friend around instead of her mother. Lady Bingham would be hovering over Caroline like she was an invalid, talking over any conversations and treating Caroline as if she were still a child. Caroline understood that her mother meant well, but it was exhausting.

And she was fed up with Lady Bingham standing at her side expecting her daughter to be unable to do anything for herself. It had been three

days since she had taken that fall, and while the bruises were still large and kept her leg swollen, it wasn't as bad as it had been. Caroline could bend her leg, albeit gingerly, and she could walk with a limp as long as she wasn't rushed about it.

Having Sarah with her was like a breath of fresh air. Her friend supported her, but she didn't treat her like she needed to be stuck in bed all day being fed grapes and getting fanned by leaves. Sarah had giggled at that description when Caroline told her.

Also, Sarah's presence would be useful against James Beaufort. Even though they had agreed to the dinner – or rather, Lady Bingham had agreed to the dinner before Caroline could make up her mind – that didn't mean Caroline was ready to forgive James for deserting her the way he did. She was going because her mother jumped ahead and gave an affirmative answer.

And, deep down, she wanted to see Henry again. There had been no contact, although Caroline hadn't really expected any, but she found herself wondering what Henry was up to. Was he all right? Was he just as upset with his brother? Caroline hoped so. He had done a very nice thing when he could have just walked away.

Would he be here tonight? It was his family home, after all. Or would he be making excuses and heading off elsewhere? Part of Caroline was hoping she would see him at the dinner table, even if they didn't speak.

That bang on the head really had to have either knocked some sense into her or knocked some sense out of her because now all Caroline could think about was Henry Beaufort. About how he touched her and treated her gently. Quite the opposite of what he had been before.

Something was really wrong with her after that.

With Sarah at her side and holding her elbow, Caroline hobbled into the house. Their shawls and hats were taken by the servants, and a footman appeared at Caroline's side.

"Would you like some help, My Lady?"

"I think ..." Caroline began, but then a voice across the foyer made her turn.

"I'll help her, Oates. You go and see to the other guests."

Oates nodded and moved away. Caroline turned, her heart picking up the pace as she saw Henry walk across the hall. He looked very handsome tonight in pale blue, his jaw clean-shaven, and his hair still looked damp. He must have had a quick wash before her arrival. Caroline's mouth went dry as he approached them.

"Lady Caroline."

Henry didn't take his eyes off her as he bowed, and Caroline bit her lip.

"Lord Bannock."

His mouth twitched.

“I won’t be offended if you don’t greet me properly in return. I don’t want you to end up on the floor.”

“Thank you.” Caroline swallowed. She hated that she was almost squeaking when she spoke. “I didn’t think you were going to be here.”

“Well, it is a family affair, and my mother said that I’m family, so I must attend.” His eyes twinkled. “I’ll probably be made to eat in the kitchen, though.”

“That’s a bit harsh, don’t you think?”

“It’s happened before.” Henry paused. “How’s your leg? It’s not hurting too much, is it?”

“Hmm? Oh! Oh, no.” How had she forgotten that she was leaning more on one leg? Caroline felt her cheeks getting warm. She needed to focus. “It’s better. I can move my leg a little more, but it still hurts a bit.”

“Considering the bruises that were starting to come up on your leg that day, I’m surprised you can move it at all.” His expression warmed. “But I’m glad things are improving.”

They stared at each other. Caroline couldn’t bring herself to look away

from those blue eyes of his. Why was it, every time she looked at him, she kept sinking into that beautiful dark blue?

This was going to be a long evening.

A pointed cough had Henry turning away, which had Caroline suddenly feeling empty. He faced Sarah and gave her a warm smile before bowing.

“Lady Lakeford.”

“Lieutenant Beaufort.” Sarah curtsied. “Or would you want to be addressed as Lord Bannock?”

“I prefer the former, but I have a feeling the latter will be more likely tonight.” Henry shrugged. “Chances are, nobody’s going to notice if you call me Lieutenant.”

“That’s awful.”

That was out before Caroline could stop herself. Henry arched an eyebrow, not immediately responding. Then he glanced towards a door off the foyer when there was a sudden burst of raised voices.

“Oh, great. He’s started again.”

“Who?” Caroline asked.

“James has been drinking. A lot. Father’s trying to get him to stop right now.” Henry shook his head with a frown. “He thinks he’s in control, but he’s starting to sway.”

Caroline and Sarah exchanged glances. That didn’t bode well for a good evening.

“Are you trying to warn us about something?” Sarah asked.

“Maybe. I just want you two to be aware that he gets a little ... hands-on when he’s drunk.” Henry grimaced. “I don’t want either of you to get accosted because you ended up alone with him.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.” Caroline lifted her chin. “I can take care of myself. Although you might have to help me hobble away.”

Henry’s mouth twitched.

“I’ll remember that.” He held out an arm. “Do you want me to escort you in? Or are you all right walking on your own?”

Caroline gauged the distance between where they were and where the door was. She could get to it on her own, but she would get exhausted, and then her leg would really hurt. Maybe it was best she took the help where she could. Squaring her shoulders, she nodded.

“Please escort me, Lieutenant.”

Something flickered in Henry’s eyes, and the look became heated. He took her hand and placed it on his arm, never taking his eyes off her. Caroline was surprised she could breathe when he was looking at her like this.

How was she going to cope with the rest of the evening if she was getting into a fluster all the time?

“Bannock!”

Caroline looked around. The tall, silver-haired gentleman she recognised as the Duke of Cornwall had appeared in the hallway and was glaring at his son. It was like he was expecting to see his son causing trouble. Henry fixed a cool stare on his father, not seeming to flinch at his father’s sharp tone.

“I’m simply escorting the guests in, Father. Lady Caroline is still injured, and I didn’t want her to fall over.”

Cornwall looked like he was about to bark out something, and Caroline found herself speaking up.

“He’s just being kind, Your Grace. Lieutenant Beaufort has never been inappropriate with me, and he’s been good to me.” She gave Henry a smile. “I don’t have any objections to him escorting me unless you have a specific reason why he shouldn’t?”

Cornwall blinked, looking bewildered. Henry looked equally surprised. Had no one ever stood up for him against his parents? That made Caroline feel some sympathy towards the man. No one deserved to be on their own like that. After a moment of stunned silence, Cornwall grunted and turned away.

“Just go and join the guests, Bannock. And don’t commandeer Lady Caroline’s attention. Your brother won’t like that.”

Then he was gone, heading down the hall. Caroline felt the tension lessen in Henry as he turned to her.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For standing up for me. Very few people have done that.”

Caroline squeezed his arm, feeling the muscles bunch again.

“Credit goes where credit’s due. That’s what Father always says.”

“And your father is a very wise man.”

They stared at each other. Then Sarah coughed again, causing Caroline to jump. Her friend was staring at them with raised eyebrows, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. Henry cleared his throat and turned away.

“Let’s get you sitting down.”

That sounded like a good idea. Caroline’s leg was beginning to hurt.

“Would you like to sit with us?”

The question came out before she could stop it. Henry almost tripped over his own feet and stared at her.

“Me, sit with you?”

“You sound surprised.”

“I ...” Henry blinked. “I just wasn’t expecting it from you.”

“I understand.” Caroline glanced at Sarah, who was watching her friend with interest. “But small steps need to be made. I’m still not ready to forgive the past, and I hope you can understand that, but I can be a decent person and have a decent conversation. If you’re agreeable, that is.”

For a moment, she thought Henry was going to turn her down. He was silent for a beat too long, which had her wanting to squirm. Then Henry gave her a smile that made her good leg feel weak, and she had to fight back a whimper as heat pooled in her belly. Oh, dear lord, that smile. It was devastating.

If he had used that smile on her before, she might have been swayed before.

“All right. And thank you for your understanding. Although ...”

“Although what?”

Henry winced.

“I feel like this is going to backfire on me.”

Caroline smiled.

“Just as long as you don’t start throwing things at my head, I’ll be fine.”

Henry chuckled.

“I’ll remember that.”

Chapter 11

Henry found himself in a better mood over the next few days. He had not expected Caroline to react to him as she did. When she arrived at the house, Henry was expecting her to be cool and brush him off. She had been in an inappropriate position with him, even if it was for a valid reason. That was not something a woman should be comfortable about, no matter what the situation.

And yet, she had been nice to him. Sweet, even. She and Sarah sat with Henry throughout the dinner and treated him like a person instead of a pariah. Henry knew that everyone in the room had been staring at them, thinking they had gone mad, but he didn't care. He liked to be seen as a person, and it felt even better knowing it was coming from Caroline Folton.

That didn't mean she had forgiven him. Caroline had warned him several times, and Henry understood. Even if it felt like she was trying to convince herself more than him. But he would take what he could get. It felt nice to have her attention, and it wasn't bad attention.

The evening had passed by far more pleasantly than Henry anticipated. Caroline had kept up the conversation, and she was actually laughing with him by the end of the evening. Her eyes really sparkled when she was laughing, and Henry found himself wanting to see that happen more often.

Things were still a bit tentative between them, but it was slowly mending. Maybe Bingham was right and that he could be able to get Caroline to see the truth in the end. Henry really wanted that to happen. He wanted to tell her that he wasn't the monster she remembered when they were children. It was horrible to be around her and wish she wouldn't look at him as if he was one step away

from being the Devil.

It was hard to be in love with someone and they hated him in return.

Henry hadn't believed it was possible to have love at first sight or second sight. He believed it was something that came in time and meant to be a mutual thing. Henry never expected it to happen to him that he took one look at a person and found himself falling for them. And he never expected it to be for a girl who openly declared her hatred for him.

Caroline Folton turned him upside-down.

But not tonight. This evening, there was a ball at the Earl and Countess of Bath's house on the city's outskirts. And Caroline was going, although she was unsure about how she would dance if her leg was still in bad shape. Henry hadn't planned on going, choosing to go into Bath and play cards with some of his sailor friends nearby, but once he heard Caroline was heading to the ball, he said that he would meet her there. It was like he needed to be close to her.

He felt like such a sap.

Henry checked his attire in the mirror, ignoring his valet as the other man bustled about. When he left the room, he was whistling a jaunty tune. The door opened across the hall, and James stepped out into the hall. He was dressed similarly, although he looked like he had been drinking already with reddened eyes and dishevelled hair. He arched an eyebrow at his brother.

“You’re in a good mood.”

“Am I?” Henry kept walking. “I haven’t noticed.”

“Well, I have.” James hurried after him. “You’ve been like this since we had Caroline Folton over for dinner.”

Henry sighed. James had been grumpy and snappy towards him since that dinner. Instead of going to Caroline to apologise and make up for the way he behaved by deserting her in a time of need, James had got himself drunk and started flirting with a baron’s daughter. Henry was glad he was with Caroline and had witnesses for his whereabouts because he was sure that he would have been blamed for James getting drunk somehow. His brother was getting better at twisting stories.

“Maybe I just had a good evening, and it’s just followed through into this week.” Henry reached the top of the stairs. “It can happen.”

“Not when it involves Caroline.” James grabbed his arm. “You snagged her away from me, Henry. That’s not very brotherly.”

“Grow up, James. You did that yourself.” Henry pulled his arm away. “You were drunk.”

“I’m allowed to drink, aren’t I?”

“Not when it makes you someone no one wants to be around. It’s

hardly surprising that Lady Caroline didn't want to interact with you."

James pouted.

"I sent her flowers. A big bouquet of roses. What more does she want?"

"Maybe an apology in person would do?" Henry shot back. "Or is that too difficult to do? I can't remember you ever giving a sincere apology."

James scowled.

"Why should I apologise when I've never done anything wrong?"

"Would you like to try that with someone who actually listens to your lies? Because that's not going to work on me." Henry turned away. "If you'll excuse me? I've got to get myself prepared to leave for the dance. You know the Countess of Bath doesn't like lateness."

He headed down the stairs, only to hear James hurrying after him a moment later.

"Caroline is meant to be my girl, Henry," he hissed. "Not yours. She will never be yours."

Henry tried to ignore the fact that felt like James had stabbed him. He kept on walking.

“You really think she’s going to want your attitude in a marriage?”

“I wonder what lies you’ve been pouring into her ear about me. I bet you’ve been making yourself look good.” James sneered. “She was practically all over you last week.”

“No, she wasn’t, and I never said a word.” Henry stopped and turned, James having to sidestep to stop himself from bumping into Henry and sending both of them tumbling. “Lady Caroline can make up her own mind. You’re just sore that the lies about me are starting to wear off.”

“What lies? You are as bad as people think.”

“Only because I won’t let you do it anymore.” It was worrying that James was beginning to believe his own lies. “Look, James, you can believe what you want to believe. You never listened in the first place.”

James’ eyes glittered.

“I’m going to have Caroline as mine by the end of the night.” He prodded Henry in the chest. “Then you won’t be able to touch her.”

“Who said this was a competition?”

"I did. I said we were going to see who she fell in love with first, remember?"

"I remember, and I never said I was getting involved." Henry grabbed James' wrist before his brother prodded him again. "Lady Caroline isn't your girl. And she's not mine, either. I think that's for her to decide if she pursues anything with either of us. If you push her, she's not going to want you."

"I can make sure she won't want anyone else." James looked Henry up and down. "You think she wants you? I saw the way you two were. It looked like she was hanging onto your every word. You act like Caroline is your girl already."

Because she is. Henry pushed that aside. Now was not the time.

"She was just grateful there was someone present who wasn't treating her like an object. I'm sure you would prefer to be seen as a person than something that's consistently passed around."

"She's a woman. That's all she's good for."

Henry stared.

"Did you just seriously say that about her?"

“I did.” James tugged his hand away. “Don’t approach her tonight, Henry. Don’t go anywhere near her.”

“Unless you want to publicly butt in while I’m conversing with her, there’s not really anything you can do about that.”

“Really?” James’ lip curled. “Try me.”

They were still glaring at each other when there was the sound of someone coming down the stairs. A second later, Henry heard his father’s voice, causing both brothers to turn. Cornwall looked from Henry to James and back again.

“What’s going on here?” he demanded. “James?”

“Henry’s trying to take the woman I want to marry off me, Father.” James folded his arms and fixed a smug look at Henry. “He believes that he’s better than I am.”

“How old are we, James? Six years old? Really?”

Cornwall sighed.

“Henry, why are you ruining the evening before we’ve even started?”

“And why do you always assume that I’m the problem, Father?”

“With your past, do you think we should assume it was your brother?”

Henry snorted and turned away.

“With your past, considering how much you favour him before listening to me, it’s hardly a surprise.”

Normally, he wouldn’t talk back to his father, but Henry was too upset to care. His good mood had been tugged away by his brother, and now his own father was treating him like he had done something wrong.

“Did you forget who you were talking to, Henry?” Cornwall snapped.

“No, Father, I didn’t.” Henry reached the bottom of the stairs and turned to find the duke hurrying down after him. “I’m just fed up with being blamed when my brother decides he’s going to be a spoiled brat. Now, if you’ll excuse me? I don’t want to be late for this dance.”

“We haven’t finished talking, Henry.”

“Yes, we have, Father.” Henry turned away and beckoned one of the footmen. “Oates, would you get my hat and cloak?”

“Yes, Lord Bannock.”

Cornwall snorted.

“You really don’t deserve the title of Lord Bannock.”

“You’ve been saying that for a while now, Father.” Henry didn’t turn around. If he did, he was going to see James, and then he really would lose his temper. “If you believe that I don’t deserve the title, perhaps you should take it off me now. Then I won’t have an obligation to return home to take on the dukedom once you pass away. Your favourite son can run it into the ground and obliterate what you’ve worked hard for, but I’m sure you’ll find a way to blame me, anyway.”

Cornwall made a spluttering noise. Henry glanced over his shoulder and saw how bright red his father’s face had gone. He looked like he was about to have a fit.

“I don’t know where we went wrong with you, Henry, but I’m really ashamed.”

Henry sighed and gathered his belongings from Oates before heading towards the door.

“Not half as ashamed as I am, Father.”

It was startling how just a few minutes being berated for something that he never did was enough to change his mood so quickly. Nothing

would ever change in his house.

The sooner he got back to London and his ship, the better. Even if it meant walking away from the woman he loved.

#

“Easy there!” Sarah caught Caroline as she swayed. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” Caroline grimaced as she put a bit more pressure on her leg. “I think I’m going to need to rest my leg. It’s feeling a little sore.”

“I’m not surprised. You’ve been on your feet since we arrived.” Sarah looked at the busy ballroom. “I swear almost every eligible gentleman here has asked you to dance.”

“I don’t think that’s the case, but it certainly feels like it.”

Six dances. Caroline had not danced that much in one evening, in one go, since her first ball the year before. She had thought she could handle it now her leg was better, and she could walk on it without limping. Evidently, her leg had other ideas. It wasn’t happy about the dancing. Now Caroline was trying not to limp and make a fool of herself.

“Here,” Sarah took her friend’s arm, “lean on me. Let’s get you sitting down for a while.”

That sounded like a relief. Caroline really wanted to sit down. She allowed Sarah to lead her out of the ballroom and into the dining room, sitting her down at the first available table. That did feel better, and Caroline liked having the weight off her feet. She resisted the urge to pull up her skirts and check her leg.

The bruises were going down, leaving her skin looking more yellow than pink, and Dr Preston had taken the stitches out of her knee. He was impressed with Henry's stitching and commented there was a good chance she wouldn't have a scar. If she did, it would be barely noticeable.

That was something. At least Henry had done something right.

Henry. Caroline found herself looking through the door and into the ballroom in the hopes of seeing him. He had been present when she first arrived, looking relieved that she had turned up. Caroline had been a little perturbed by the way he openly stared at her, but then that stare had gone, and his smile had returned. It left her shivering as she remembered it.

Men looked at her, but they didn't look at her like Henry had. It was ... different. More intense. What did that mean?

He had asked her for the dance she had promised him, and Caroline had accepted almost immediately. Their dance had been innocent, but to her, it felt full of flirtation, even when they barely touched. Caroline felt shivers up and down her spine, aware that Henry never took his eyes off her. Then when they finished, he had bowed over her hand, his lips brushing against her fingers. Caroline had had to fight back a gasp.

Suddenly, she wanted to be in his company instead of sneering at him and pushing him away. That was startling, and Caroline was left confused. Why was she suddenly changing her mind on Henry? She had been adamant that she would always hate Henry Beaufort for hurting her, and yet she was starting to see him in a different light.

Perhaps it was that time when he had been given an opportunity to hurt her again, and he hadn't done it. When Frances had gone to fetch what Henry needed, Henry had put himself apart from her and stayed across the room until Frances returned. He didn't even look at her, even when her legs were on display. Was that him being a gentleman? Or was it something else?

It had to be that which was switching Caroline's mindset. If he was as horrible as everyone said, and what she had believed before, he would have done something to put her in a precarious position. And he was gentle; he was caring. He was ...

Normal.

Caroline didn't think she could forgive him anytime soon for his actions, but she wasn't about to push him away if Henry pursued her. If he gave any indication that he wanted courtship – and from the way he had been looking at her, it seemed to be going that way – Caroline would be accepting it.

Maybe she had already forgiven him. Caroline didn't know. She wasn't sure what to make of her conflicting emotions right now. It felt like her mind was in a complete whirl.

“Caroline?”

“Hmm?”

Sarah was looking at her strangely.

“Are you all right?”

“Why do you ask?”

“You seem to be looking for someone.”

“What? Oh.” Caroline hadn’t realised she had been staring hard into the ballroom for quite a while. She felt her face getting warm. “I wasn’t looking for anyone. I was watching the dancing.”

“I see.” Sarah arched an eyebrow. “Is that what you’re doing?”

It was too late in the day, and Caroline was too worn out to deal with her friend talking like she was speaking in riddles.

“Sarah, you know I don’t like it when you’re like this. Speak plainly, please.”

“You just seemed interested in finding someone in particular.” Sarah grinned. “I don’t know who you’re looking for, exactly, but I was just curious.”

From the way she was grinning, she knew exactly who Caroline was looking for. Caroline pressed her fingers to the bridge of her nose.

“You’re talking in circles again. That’s too much for my head.”

“That wasn’t talking in circles.”

“It shows how tired I am if I can’t understand you.”

Sarah chuckled and leaned over to squeeze her friend’s hand.

“Don’t worry about Lieutenant Beaufort. I’m sure he’ll ask you for another dance.”

Caroline groaned. Sarah was going to be prodding her about Henry for the rest of the evening. At least they weren’t arguing about whether he was a good or a bad person. Caroline was beginning to believe that he wasn’t.

If that were the case, how did he explain cutting her head open and almost shooting her when they were children? Was that to say ...?

Caroline didn't know where her thoughts were going. It was getting too stuffy in the dining room. She stood up, testing her weight on her bad leg. Not too bad.

"I think I'm going to go outside for some air. I'll walk on my own."

"All right." Sarah got to her feet. "But it's a little chilly outside. Shall I fetch your shawl?"

"Please."

Taking it slowly, Caroline crossed to the huge windows that opened out onto the terrace. The cool air hit her and caused her to gasp. Maybe she should wait inside for her shawl. The warmth of the day had gone, and with the evening fully set in, it was getting chilly.

She was about to go back inside when she heard a sound off to her left. Caroline peered into the shadows, but she couldn't really see anything.

"Who's there?"

There was another shuffling sound. Then Caroline saw a movement, just out of sight of the windows. Curiosity getting the better of her, Caroline moved closer.

"Hello? Who's there?"

Knowing her luck, it was a cat that was sniffing around the garden. Any second, it was going to jump out and leave Caroline feeling like a fool. She was beginning to jump at shadows because of a stupid animal.

But the shape that began to take form as she moved closer was not a cat. It was far too big. It was a man sitting on the edge of the terrace. He leaned back, his head thrown back, and Caroline heard a guzzling sound. Someone was drinking on the terrace, away from the other guests.

“Are you all right, sir?”

“Does it look like I’m all right?”

Caroline stared.

“Lord Beaufort?”

“That’s me.” James hiccuped. “God, can’t a man have a drink in peace?”

From the way he was slurring his words, Caroline had a feeling this wasn’t the first bottle he had been drinking out of. On questioning Henry about where his family were, Henry had said his mother was talking to people across the room and both his father and brother had gone to play cards. From what she could tell, James’ play hadn’t gone

very well.

“What happened?”

“I lost. A lot.”

“You lost at cards?”

James snorted.

“Well, a man needs some sort of entertainment. At least there’s the cards.” He somehow managed to get to his feet, even as he swayed to a point Caroline thought he would fall over again. “I don’t know what you’re complaining about. You’ve been dancing with my brother. You should be happy to have some attention.”

Caroline bristled.

“I think you need to stop drinking, My Lord.”

“You can’t tell me what to do.”

“And you can’t have an opinion on who I dance with. Your brother asked, and I accepted.”

James sneered at her, giving her a scathing look.

“I don’t know why you would want to dance with a man who gave you so many scars.”

“The same could be said about you.” Caroline lifted her chin. “The doctor said I could get a scar on my leg from what I was racing you. That one could be attributed to you if we’re going to split hairs.”

“Oh, that reminds me, how is the leg? You seem to be walking on it better.” James openly stared at her legs. Then he reached for her. “May I have a look?”

“What? No!” Caroline slapped his hands away and stepped back. “Don’t touch me!”

“I’ve seen them before.”

“Not with my consent. You were very uncouth at that point, and my state at the time didn’t permit you to behave like that.”

Even in the dark, she could see James’ eyes glittering. It wasn’t very nice, and she felt the prickling of apprehension. Maybe she should go back inside and wait for Sarah instead. She shouldn’t be out here on her own.

“How about a dance?” James reached for her. “We should do more of

that.”

“I think I’m going to decline.” Caroline pulled away. “My leg is hurting, so I don’t want to do it anymore.”

James growled. Then he grabbed her wrist before Caroline could react and hauled her against him, his arm wrapping around her waist.

“I said, how about a dance?”

“And I declined, Lord Beaufort.” Caroline tried to pull away, but she couldn’t. “Let me go.”

“You would turn me down?”

“When you’re drunk and behaving like this, absolutely.”

She could smell the alcohol on his breath, and it was horrible. James was really drunk. He couldn’t be in his right mind. But something told her that James didn’t need drink to behave like this. He just needed privacy, no witnesses.

No help for the woman.

“You know,” James said as he bent his head, nuzzling her cheek, “I don’t need to marry you to ruin you.”

“What?”

“You’re looking for marriage and a family, just like anyone else. I don’t need to marry you to make sure nobody wants you.” James sniggered against her neck, which had Caroline shuddering. “I can just ruin your reputation, and then your prospects will dwindle away to nothing.”

Caroline felt really cold. He was right. He could hold her in an embrace now and not need to do anything, but if someone came along now, all they would see were two people who weren’t married in an embrace and believe that something was going on. Word would get around quickly, and then there would be expectations that Caroline would marry James.

Or he could drag her away to where nobody would be able to see them and do something that made her feel sick.

She had just been threatened, and Caroline could feel the panic building. She needed help.

“I think I’m going to go back inside.” She attempted to step back as stiffly as she could, without success. “I don’t feel comfortable around you.”

“Not a chance.” James’ arms tightened, and he started pressing kisses up her neck. “Give me a kiss, and I’ll let you go.”

“No!”

James sniggered, grabbing her head by the hair and yanking her head back. Caroline gasped as he kissed her, trying to push him away. He stank and tasted of drink, and it made her want to gag. After what felt like forever, James broke the kiss. Even in the darkness, she could see his glee.

“There. You see? All I need to do is go back inside and say that you were begging me to ravish you away from prying eyes. With your state as it is, you won’t be able to argue your point and say it was otherwise. No one will believe you.”

“They will.”

Even as she said it, Caroline knew he was right. She could protest and argue as much as she wanted, and nobody would listen to her. James smirked.

“You know the man’s word is gospel. Especially mine.” He crooked a finger at her. “Come here.”

“No!”

“Leave her alone!”

Chapter 12

Henry couldn't believe what he was seeing, but he felt sick at James' actions. He had suspected his brother had done this before with other women, but Henry had never come upon him with his hands all over someone. And to see him forcefully holding Caroline in his arms and forcing a kiss on her ...

Henry couldn't begin to describe the rage that filled his body. James was really overstepping the boundaries.

Caroline spun around, wobbling at the sudden motion. She whimpered when she saw him and stumbled towards him. Henry didn't even need to hesitate. He hurried to her, catching her in his arms as she staggered, holding her against his chest as Caroline shook. The rage was beginning to overflow now.

He was glad he had gone looking for her.

"Oh, so it's the heroic navy officer, is it?" James sneered. He was swaying so much it was a wonder he hadn't fallen over yet. "Come to rescue your lady. Well, she's not yours, brother. She's mine."

"She's nobody's lady, James." Henry couldn't help his hands from tightening around the woman shaking in his embrace. "And Lady Caroline doesn't deserve to be accosted by you."

"She needs to know her place. When a man demands something of her, she's supposed to jump to it."

Henry snarled, causing both James and Caroline to jump. Henry stroked Caroline's hair, trying to calm her.

"A woman is her own person, and she has a right to say no."

James scoffed and waved a hand.

"Oh, get lost, Henry. Nobody cares what you think."

"I've noticed, but what sort of gentleman would I be turning my back on a woman clearly being manhandled?"

"Gentleman? You?" James barked out a laugh. "Don't make me laugh! You've never been a gentleman your whole life."

"At least I can behave better in mixed company than you can," Henry shot back. "I don't know where things went wrong, but you need to stop. Your behaviour is going to be found out without me present sooner or later, and people will realise the truth."

Caroline had stiffened in his arms. Had he said too much? Maybe now was not the time to tell her what had gone on all those years ago. Certainly not when James was present and very drunk. His brother rolled his eyes. He did look moments away from tipping over. Henry was tempted to push him and let him lie where he was.

“No one’s going to believe me capable of anything.”

“You mean no one’s going to believe that you can get drunk and belligerent when you’ve done it many times? I’ve seen the way you behave. You can’t hide your drinking from everyone.”

Although from the way James had been at their house when they had their dinner party, it was going to be discovered how badly James behaved sooner rather than later. Henry had seen how bad his brother could get, and what had happened at the dinner party was tame compared to what he could do.

He was in trouble. Henry couldn’t help feeling pity for his brother. So much for trying to protect him when they were little boys. James had thrown that back in his face.

James looked at Caroline, who was still tight in Henry’s embrace, and sniggered.

“You think you’ll be able to rescue her, do you? She’s just going to blame you, just like the other times. She will always blame you. I’m going to walk away from this with no guilt.”

“Like you have so many times.”

“Exactly.” James gestured at Caroline. “Anyway, look at her. If you go back in with her now, she’s going to look like you manhandled her. Doesn’t matter what you say; everyone will believe that you put your hands on her.”

Caroline lifted her head.

“I’ll tell everyone what really happened,” she said defiantly, even as her voice wobbled.

“Like I said, my dear, no one listens to a woman.”

“What about a witness?”

Henry turned. He hadn’t realised that Sarah had appeared. She was staring at the scene with a fury that he hadn’t seen in a long time. Sarah stepped onto the terrace and stalked over to James.

“How about I back up what I saw, My Lord? Do you think they’re going to believe you’re not the innocent one here?”

“I doubt anyone would listen to you.” James looked her up and down. “You’re always on my brother’s side. People believe you two are lovers, anyway.”

Henry felt Caroline stiffen and bit back a wince. Why did James have to say that? Sarah looked even more enraged.

“I’m on Henry’s side because I know his character.” She folded her arms, standing defiant as she glared up at James. “If you want to take

it further, I can always send for my father. Accusing an admiral's favourite officer is going to go badly for you, especially when the navy will have multiple witnesses that can vouch for Henry's character."

"Favourite officer?" James scoffed. "Him? Ridiculous!"

There was no point going further with this. They were going to go round and round in circles, and Caroline was shivering. Henry could feel the goosebumps coming up on her arms.

"Just get inside and get sober, James," he said sharply. "I should have put a stop to this a long time ago. That was my mistake, but I'm not about to let you screw up anything more for anyone else."

"Fine, I'll go." James looked Caroline up and down and licked his lips. "If anyone asks, I'll tell them what I saw. They'll believe me against the three of you."

Henry didn't respond. He knew that James was right. Nobody was going to believe him, and a woman's voice wasn't taken into account for the most part.

James staggered around the side of the house, singing loudly and off-key with his words slurring. Henry was glad he had taken the second carriage to the ball; he was not about to be in the same small space with his brother.

He eased Caroline out of his arms and turned her to face him. It shouldn't have shocked him to see the tears streaking down Caroline's face, but it did.

“Caroline?” He wiped a thumb across her cheek, trying to wipe away the tears. “Are you all right?”

“I’ll live.” Caroline swallowed. “Can he really tell people he witnessed us in an embrace and he’ll be believed?”

“He’ll try it. I know he will.”

“Then it’s best that you two are not left alone for the near future,” Sarah said briskly. She appeared at Caroline’s side and gasped as she looked her friend over. “Oh, my! Look at your dress! What on earth happened?”

“What?” Caroline looked down. “Oh.”

Then Henry saw it. The sleeve of Caroline’s dress was ripped, almost hanging by a thread. He hadn’t noticed it before.

“Didn’t you see what happened, Sarah?” Caroline asked.

“I only came on the tail-end of that.”

“We’ll discuss it in a better place.” Henry glanced towards the open doors to the dining room. How nobody else had come out to see what the commotion was, he had no idea, but if they got caught now with

Caroline's dress in disarray, they wouldn't need James to pour the poison. "Let's get Caroline inside and see what we can do about her dress."

"I've got some pins with me." Sarah offered. "I can fix it up."

"Then let's do that." Henry looked down at Caroline. "Do you think you can walk?"

"I'll see what I can do." Caroline swallowed. "Just get me inside. Please."

Seeing her looking so vulnerable again made Henry want to hold her and not let go. James had a lot to answer for.

#

Caroline was shaking. She had never expected something like that to happen. Sure, James had been acting oddly and drinking a lot on the last two occasions she had seen him, but he had never behaved like that. The shock was getting to her, and she felt really cold.

The only warmth she could feel was coming from Henry. He kept his arms around her as he led her around the side of the house and through a separate door, away from prying eyes. Caroline knew he was pushing the boundaries of social etiquette by holding her like this, and she should be pushing him away. But she couldn't.

She found herself sinking into his embrace, desperately seeking that warmth and the feel of his strong, firm arms around her. She ended up rubbing her cheek against the soft fabric of his shirt, relishing how nice it felt against her.

Did he just growl? Caroline was sure his arms tightened around her. She could feel his heart beating against her cheek. It felt like it was going faster than she expected.

Why did that make her own heart race?

It had to be because she had been manhandled. That was it. It had nothing to do with the man holding her like he didn't want to let go.

Sarah hurried on ahead and opened a door, poking her head into a room.

"This is empty. And it doesn't look like it's been used for a while. Not ideal, but we won't be disturbed while we fix Caroline's dress."

"Then we'll use it," Henry said grimly.

He led Caroline inside, and all Caroline could see was darkness. The only light came from the small window, giving the furniture a vague outline and a spooky sheen. This had to be a storeroom of some kind. It didn't look very comfortable.

"Sit down here, Caroline." Henry eased her onto a box, the sharp edge

digging into the back of her knees. "I'll see if I can get us some light."

Caroline couldn't say anything. She simply nodded. Although she wished they would keep it dark, she was sure she looked a right mess with her torn dress and her hair in disarray. The pins were sticking into her scalp, and she was trying not to cry from the pain. She knew her face was going to be blotchy and look absolutely terrible.

Henry shouldn't be seeing that.

Why not? This is hardly your worst. And Henry's seen plenty of that already.

There was a snapping noise, which made her jump, and then the light of a match appeared. Henry was focusing on lighting a candle in his hand, which he put into a candlestick.

"We're in luck. This is where the candles are stored. We could stay in here all night and not need to worry about light."

"Not exactly something to say right now, Henry," Sarah said sharply. She had brought a small table over and was looking through her reticule. "Just bring the light over here. I'm going to need it to fix Caroline's dress."

"You carry a needle and thread with you?"

"Of course I do." Sarah shrugged. "My mother said it never hurt to be

prepared. I just never expected to be using it like this.”

Henry grunted, brought the candle over, and placed it on the table. Then he turned to Caroline. The flickering light covered half of his face, and Caroline felt another shiver. Lord, he looked beautiful in this light. Beautiful and dangerous.

Where had that come from?

“Caroline?”

“Hmm?”

Caroline blinked. She hadn’t realised she had been staring. Henry leaned over and peered at her, his expression grim.

“Are you all right? You look pale.”

Caroline licked her lips. When had they got so dry? Henry’s eyes flickered, and he reached out. Caroline jumped as his fingers brushed against her cheek before pressing his hands against her forehead.

“You feel hot.”

“But I feel so cold.”

“That’s normal. You’ve had a shock.” Henry swallowed and withdrew his hand, straightening up and moving back. “I must apologise for James’ behaviour. That is not conduct becoming of a gentleman and a soldier. Unfortunately, James seems to listen to his own tune. It’s difficult to get him to believe otherwise once he’s got going.”

“It’s a wonder he’s managed to keep his position in the army,” Sarah muttered. She had threaded a piece of cotton through the needle, her movements precise in the dim light. She turned to Caroline. “Now, stay still, Caroline. I’ll fix this sleeve for you. Once that’s done, and I’ve rearranged your hair, nobody will notice that you’ve been in a tussle.”

Caroline believed that. She had seen how good her friend was with a needle. She was one of those people who could turn rags into a stunning dress. She remained motionless as Sarah got to work, unable to take her eyes off Henry. He stood out of reach of the light, leaning on one of the racks with his arms folded. She could see the outline of his figure, but she couldn’t see his face.

It was like he was closing himself off from them without having to leave the room. Caroline realised that she didn’t want him to leave. She wanted Henry to stay with her. Having him around right now was making her calm. If he had left or wasn’t around, she was sure she would still be in hysterics.

What was happening to her? That wasn’t supposed to be how she felt around Henry Beaufort. Why was she changing towards him?

It’s only because he protected you from being molested. You’re drawn to him because of what he did.

I have a feeling there's something else going on. And I'm not sure I like it.

“There.” Sarah snapped off the thread and tied it off. “Not bad, if I say so myself. Nobody’s going to notice the difference.”

“Will it last for a little longer?” Henry asked. “Or is it going to fall apart in five minutes?”

Sarah snorted.

“I’m sure it would if you tried sewing with those big hands of yours, but not my work.”

“You’d be surprised what I can do with these hands, Sarah.”

Caroline felt something clutch low in her belly. Something else began throbbing as her heart missed a beat or two. She shifted on the packing case, only for the throbbing to get worse. What on earth was happening to her? This evening was not going as she expected at all.

She hated floundering.

“Let’s get your hair sorted, Caroline.” Sarah moved to stand behind her friend. “We can’t have you looking like you got dragged through a hedge. It shouldn’t take long.”

“All right.”

Caroline couldn't take her eyes off Henry as she felt the pins being slid out and her hair falling about her shoulders. Even though she couldn't see his face, she couldn't stop herself from being fixated on him. She was sure she heard a sharp intake of breath, and didn't he just growl again? The throbbing between her legs was getting worse, and Caroline found it distracting.

She should be telling Henry to leave. Aside from the fact it wasn't really appropriate for him to be in here, she shouldn't want him around. His presence was meant to repulse her, and Caroline didn't want to be close. And yet, she couldn't bring herself to tell him to leave. She just couldn't.

In fact, she really wanted him to stay. What was wrong with her?

God, Caroline wished she could see his face. Why wouldn't he come closer?

“Why was James saying no one would believe you?” she asked. “What did he mean that you would never be able to have what you want?”

“That's not exactly something I can discuss, My Lady.”

Why so formal? Caroline's curiosity was piqued. She tried to lean forward, only for Sarah to ease her back.

“Don’t you dare go anywhere, Caroline. I need to get this fixed.”

Caroline sighed and tried to keep still as Sarah started to pin her hair back into place. Henry had barely moved. She really wanted to see his face.

“Has no one ever listened to you before, Henry?”

She could see Henry stiffening.

“You should remember my title, Lady Caroline. It’s not appropriate to speak to me like that.”

Sarah scoffed.

“Oh, stop being so difficult, Henry, and just tell her.”

“You’re not meant to be involved, Sarah.”

“Even I can tell what’s going on. You’d have to be blind or stupid not to notice what’s happening.”

Caroline frowned. It was like these two were speaking their own language.

“Notice what? What are you talking about?”

For a moment, she thought Henry wasn't going to say anything. Then he sighed heavily, and she saw a movement that looked like he was hanging his head.

“James thought it would be amusing to try and woo you. Make it a competition between the two of us who would make you fall in love first.”

“You ...” Caroline stared. “You’ve been competing for me.”

“I wasn’t competing. I knew there was no point when you already have an opinion of me. But James ... he did it ...”

His voice trailed away. Caroline waited. Why had James done this? She was not a competition for anyone, so why had James even suggested it?

“What?”

“Henry,” Sarah said quietly.

Henry groaned and pushed off the rack heading towards the door.

“I can’t do this, Sarah.”

“Please, Henry?” Caroline called after him.

Henry froze as he touched the door handle. But he didn’t turn around. Even in the dark, Caroline could see the tension in his shoulders. Shrugging Sarah’s hands away, Caroline got to her feet.

“Please, just tell me. I deserve to know.”

Henry didn’t turn around, but Caroline could hear him breathing heavily.

“I’ve admired you for a long time, Caroline.” His voice was low, regretful. “I know we’ve only met twice before I was forced into the navy, but I saw you from afar many times. You were always on my mind while I was at sea. James figured it out, and now he thinks he can take away the one woman who’s captured my attention, knowing that you’ll have nothing to do with me.”

Caroline was left stunned. She wasn’t sure what she was expecting, but it wasn’t that. She realised that she was swaying and leaned on the table.

“You ... you admire me?”

“I do. And there are times when I wish I didn’t.”

“Why do you say that?”

Henry turned his head, but he didn’t turn around. Then he straightened up, his tone more formal and sharper.

“I’ll take my leave now. Make sure Lady Caroline is not left alone, Sarah.”

“I’m not letting her out of my sight.”

Henry grunted, and then he was leaving the room, closing the door quietly behind him. Caroline’s legs started feeling weak, and she sagged back onto the packing case. Henry admired her? How was that possible? Their interactions were always fraught, and they were not exactly kind to each other. How did that happen?

“Caroline?” Sarah laid a hand on her shoulder. “Caroline, talk to me.”

“I ...” Caroline could feel herself shaking. She gulped. “I think I would like to go home.”

“Are you sure?”

Caroline nodded. After James’ molestation and Henry’s confession,

there was no chance of her regaining her composure. She needed to get away and try and get her thoughts in order.

And wonder if she had misjudged the man who had just left the room.

Chapter 13

Henry was shaking as he left Caroline. It felt like someone had just ripped the air out of him, and he was struggling to breathe. Why did he have to be forced into a corner like that? He could have refused and left anyway. That's what he should have done as soon as he got Caroline into the house.

But he couldn't. Not when Caroline had asked him. That made him angry that all she had to do was say please, and he would do anything for her. That was not meant to happen. Henry had hoped that Caroline would push him away when he started holding her or that she would order him to leave as soon as they were safe. She should have kept up her hostility towards him.

But she hadn't. She had clung onto him to the point that Henry didn't think she would let go. He was sure she had been rubbing her face against his shirt. Her submissive state was something new to him, and Henry couldn't stop his reaction to it. If Sarah hadn't been there, he would have been pushing Caroline up against the wall and kissing her. It had taken a lot of self-control not to finish what his brother had started.

Then she wouldn't take her eyes off him as Sarah mended her dress. She watched him with an unblinking gaze, even as Henry retreated into the shadows. They didn't make him feel like he was protected. He was just glad Caroline didn't look down and see how aroused he was. That would be very difficult to explain away.

His self-control had almost snapped when Sarah started taking down Caroline's hair to pin it back up. Henry had not seen her with her hair loose, and it had him watching to reach out and see if it was as soft as it looked. He wanted to run his fingers through her hair and savour it.

God, he really should have left as soon as he was able. Then he wouldn't be feeling so aroused, and he wouldn't have needed to answer Caroline's question. Henry felt about two inches tall, admitting his futile admiration for her. Instead of feeling like the luckiest man alive, he felt terrible.

And that just made him angrier.

Henry didn't want to go back to the party. After what James had done, he didn't think he could maintain a cool facade. If he looked at James, there was going to be a fight. And, as always, Henry would get the blame. It didn't matter what his little brother had done, Henry would be the one in trouble. His parents didn't really need an excuse to say he was the one who was in the wrong.

If they had seen the way James had treated Caroline, would they feel differently? Henry wasn't really sure, but he was leaning towards no.

He headed back to the family home with their carriage, not seeing it as his home anymore. It hadn't been familiar or welcoming for a long time. Henry scowled into the night as the carriage rocked and trundled along. It was so tempting to pack everything up and leave. He should be going to the nearest port and keeping himself busy on the docks until it was time for him to go back to his ship. At least he could do something useful.

But then that would leave Caroline at James' mercy. And James would see this as a win. Even if Caroline refused to have anything to do with him, James would pursue her. Maybe he would even mention that they had had an interlude, even if nothing beyond a ripped dress happened. That would work against Caroline, and she would be stuck

with him.

Henry couldn't leave her alone. Even if she wouldn't take his help or accept his company again, Henry needed to protect her. It felt like a long time before James' leave finished, but he was going before Henry's leave was over. That was the only silver lining.

Caroline deserved someone on her side. And Henry wanted that to be him.

The house was quiet as Henry went inside. Chalmers, the under-butler, appeared as Henry was shrugging out of his coat.

"Lord Bannock. You're home early."

"I couldn't stand it any longer. Something would have happened, and it really would have been my fault." Henry headed towards the drawing room. "I don't know when the duke and duchess and my brother are returning, so go to bed, Chalmers. There's no need to stay up."

"Yes, Lord Bannock."

Henry entered the drawing room, noting that the fire was lit and blazing away in the grate. It seemed to take the chill out of the air. He went to the drinks cabinet and found the whisky, pouring out a healthy measure. Nobody was around to tell him that he shouldn't be drinking so much, and after what he had witnessed and his confession, he really needed a drink.

For a moment, he felt guilty for leaving Caroline at the party, knowing that James was still there. But Sarah wouldn't leave Caroline's side, that much he was confident about. His friend was loyal to Caroline.

If only she had extended that to him. She had promised not to say anything about his admiration for Caroline, and yet she had pushed him to admit it. Henry was going to be having a word with her about that. He had thought he would go through life without ever needing to say anything. With the way she felt about him, Caroline would have scoffed at him and declared her hatred again.

This just made Henry hate James even more. The dislike had started shortly after Caroline was hurt the first time, and it had built into an intense hatred while he was at sea. Distance hadn't helped. The rage he felt when he saw his brother as he walked into the room had been huge. Henry tried to keep it down, but it was getting harder to hold onto it.

If only James were taken to task. He had caused trouble left, right, and centre, and somehow he still managed to look perfect. Henry knew all about the lies their parents had been told and how they lapped them up. At this rate, the only thing that was going to expose James was when he was in the grave and unable to use that silver tongue of his.

Henry had finished his first drink, sitting in a chair staring into the fire, and was pouring out a second when he heard the front door opening and then closing with a loud bang. He could hear James singing very off-key, the lyrics not making any sense. Henry gritted his teeth. He really didn't want this now.

Maybe you should. Caroline was hurt, and James never apologised. Maybe

you should force it out of him.

Putting his glass aside, Henry headed towards the door just as James came wobbling in. He swayed and hiccoughed, his glazed eyes focusing on Henry.

“Oh. It’s you. Anything left to drink? I’m thirsty.”

Henry didn’t reply. He swung, catching James right in the mouth. The impact of his hand catching James’ teeth hurt, and his arm jolted from the pain, but it had James staggering back until he hit the wall and slid down to the floor. His expression was frozen, eyes wide in shock. Then he recovered and spluttered.

“What ... what ... what did you hit me for?”

“Because I didn’t do it earlier.” Henry massaged his fist. That had really hurt. “You assaulted Caroline.”

“We were having a little interlude. You interrupted us.”

“Does a canoodle include the word ‘no’? I heard Caroline tell you to leave her alone, and you ignored her.” Henry’s heart was racing as his rage began to climb. “You assaulted her, and you’re not even apologetic about it!”

“But I’m sure you helped her with your kind heart.” James sneered. “You had plenty of time to worm your way into her heart.”

“She knows about you making winning her heart a competition.”

“How?”

“Because I told her. I’m not going to lie if she asks what you were talking about.” Henry folded his arms. “I said I wasn’t going to be involved in it, and I know Caroline’s going to object to being seen as an object to play around with.”

James grunted. He held onto the wall as he managed to get to his feet.

“No matter. You’re not going to win her anyway. She still hates you.”

“I don’t care about the competition you created! I care that you treat her in such a foul way and expect that to be all right!”

“Who’s going to believe I accosted her? I’m a soldier and a gentleman.” James gestured at himself. “One look at me, and nobody’s going to think I’m a cad.”

“That’s only because they don’t know the truth about you,” Henry shot back. “You’ve not told Mother and Father that you deserted from the army twice, and if you go back, you’re going to be court-martialed for cowardice?”

James stiffened, his smirk fading.

“How do you know about that?”

“I have a few contacts. I know some people in your regiment. You’d be surprised what army and navy men talk about once they’ve got hold of something juicy.” Henry’s blood was pounding in his head. “They thought it would embarrass me that my younger brother was a failure and that I would be humiliated. But do you know what I felt? Nothing. I was not surprised you deserted. You were given the lowest officer rank because you’re the second son of a duke. You’ve had no fighting experience whatsoever, and you’ve never had anyone take your actions to task. The moment you were scolded, you stormed out like a spoiled child. And that didn’t surprise me because you’ve been doing that for years!”

James was breathing heavily, his hands clenched at his sides. He looked ready for a fight himself.

“And what are you going to do about it?” he said with a sneer. “Are you going to tell Mother and Father? Because I know they won’t believe you.”

“How you’ve kept it from them, I have no idea, but you can’t hide it forever. You have nowhere to go once your ‘leave’ is over. Even they will begin to suspect something if you say you’re going to extend your leave. You can’t go back to the army because of the court-martial, and I’m sure you can’t go and stay with friends because it will get back to our parents. You’re running out of options, James, and you need to address this before you get found out.”

“I have a way of doing that.” James drew himself up. “If I get married

to Caroline, then I'll have security. I can say I'm leaving the army to be a married man, and nobody would be any the wiser."

Henry couldn't believe what he was hearing. He really thought that would work?

"Don't be a fool, James! It's going to be found out soon. And after how you treated Caroline, I doubt she'll want you anywhere near her."

"She will. I'll simply apologise and ask if we can start afresh."

"She's not going to forgive you. We both know how long she can hold a grudge, and she will remember this."

"Not once I start turning on the charm again." James sniggered. "You won't stand a chance, Henry. You never did stand a chance. Doesn't matter if Caroline knows how you feel about her; she's not going to choose you."

Henry wished that didn't feel like a slap in the face. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Your drinking and your behaviour are going to get you found out. You almost put Caroline in a bad position. She doesn't deserve that."

"And you think she deserves you instead?"

“She doesn’t deserve either of us.”

That really hurt to say, but Henry did believe that. Caroline would not choose James because of his recent actions, but she wouldn’t choose him, either. Not when there was too much between them already.

“Well, I think I can change her mind.” James turned away and swayed towards the door. “I’m going to retire to bed. The company right now is very ... boring.”

Henry watched his brother leave the room, wishing he could charge after him and ram the man’s head into the wall.

#

“Are you ready to come out, Caroline?”

Caroline checked herself for the third time in the mirror. Her dress looked fine, and her corset was finally at a tightness that didn’t stop her from breathing. And her hair was braided and twisted onto her head by nothing short of brilliance by Sarah, who had said it was an enticing look.

“I ... I think so. I don’t look too bad.”

“Oh, darling, you look fine. Very presentable.” Sarah took her friend’s hand and tugged her towards the door. “Come on, the party’s already

started, and the guests are arriving. Mother is going to send a search party after us if we don't go down now."

Caroline didn't respond as they left Sarah's bedchamber and headed downstairs. She was still in her whirling thoughts. Even seeing that she looked presentable, she didn't feel so. She was wondering what was going to happen now. After Henry's confession the week before, Caroline had felt off-kilter. She didn't know what to think or what was going on.

Henry admired her? If he did, why had he hurt her in the past? She had two scars she could blame him for. If he admired her, he had a strange way of showing it.

But now, the doubts were beginning to creep in. Henry's actions now were starting to suggest that maybe, just maybe, he wasn't the culprit. He had never shown her any type of disrespect unless Caroline directed it first. And the way he had held her and protected her from his brother...

He really did care about her. Caroline didn't need to be a genius to know that with the way he looked after her.

Which meant it was James who had hurt her? But that didn't make sense. If James was the one who hurt her, why didn't anyone back then correct her when she believed it was Henry? Why did he carry on with the lie, even now? They were grown up now, so he should have been confessing to her what he did. And yet he hadn't. There was no indication that he even cared about it.

Either he was innocent, and Henry was just a manipulative psychopath, or James was so arrogant and self-centred that he didn't

care what he had done. Caroline was really hoping it was the second option now. With Henry's recent actions and her friend's defense of him, she didn't think the first was correct.

And that raised another question. Why did Henry not protest his innocence? He could do that now, and yet he never tried.

But he's been dropping hints. He's been really subtle about it.

I need to ask him directly. Then I might be able to put this at rest.

Sarah and Caroline headed through the house and stepped out into the garden. Quite a few of the guests had arrived, and Caroline could see Sarah's mother in enthusiastic conversation with an admiral and his wife. She could hear the laughter across the garden. Sarah smiled.

"I see Mother's already made herself at home."

"She's always been able to keep a conversation going, no matter the situation." Caroline wished she was able to do that. "Where's your father? Didn't he say he was going to be here?"

"He's probably in his study. He might show himself later. And I know he will when he knows Henry's going to be here." Sarah squeezed Caroline's hand. "Excuse me a moment, Caroline, I need to rescue my brother from a young lady."

She headed down the steps and went over to where her brother,

Jonathan, was practically pressed up against a bush as an attractive girl with vibrant red hair stood a little too close to him. Caroline had to giggle at the look on the brother's face. He was terrible when it came to ladies and had no idea how to interact with them. The only women he could talk to without blushing bright red and looking to run were his mother, sister, and Caroline. It was rather sweet.

"I see Jonathan's still not figured out how to talk to a woman."

Caroline's breath caught. Henry. He was here. She turned, looking up to see Henry stepping out from the French windows. He did look splendid in dark blue. Not his navy colours, but close enough. It was very easy to believe he was a nobleman. Caroline wondered what he looked like on a ship. He must cut a very fine figure.

She needed to get that image out of her head because her thoughts were starting to wander off to where they shouldn't. That had Caroline shivering. What was happening to her?

"Are you all right?" Henry frowned. "You just shivered. Are you cold?"

"No, I'm not cold." Caroline smoothed her hands down her skirts. "Your brother isn't here, is he?"

"No, he's not really a friend of the family. Sarah's made a point of telling her parents that he's not allowed on the property." Henry tilted his head. "You'll be safe from him this afternoon."

But will I be safe from you? Caroline resisted the urge to fidget, feeling

like her corset was tighter than she wanted. It was like her body had had a sudden shift with regards to his presence. She wasn't sure she liked it.

"Have you seen the admiral already?" she asked. "I know he was looking forward to seeing you."

"He spoke about me in your presence?"

"He did. I thought Sarah talking about you in warm terms was one thing, but the way the admiral talked about you was so much more." Caroline managed a smile. "I think you've made an impression on him, and he's not a man who can be pleased that easily."

"Saving his youngest son from death certainly helps." Henry stepped towards her, never taking his eyes away from hers. "And I saw the admiral just now. He and I had a talk. Once I've shown my face, I'll more than likely hide away in his study and share a drink."

"Oh." Why did that disappoint her? Caroline cleared her throat. "Are you concerned that you'll not find someone worthy of conversation?"

"I don't know. It depends on what happens." Henry's eyes darkened. "Like if you and I actually talk without getting into an argument."

"Do you think we will?"

"It depends."

They stared at each other. Caroline was getting uncomfortable, feeling warmer than she had a short while ago. She squared her shoulders.

“Are you able to be in my company long enough to go for a walk? Or is that too much for you?”

Henry’s expression flickered. Then he gave her a smile that made Caroline weak at the knees. *Oh, my.* She had really forgotten how devastating he could be.

“I think I can manage being around you.” He arched an eyebrow. “As long as you and I are not going to find it uncomfortable.”

Uncomfortable? Caroline felt uncomfortable asking him to walk with her. She shouldn’t have suggested it at all, but Caroline had answers she needed, and she wouldn’t get that with everyone around her. She managed a smile.

“I believe I can cope. Don’t you think we should try and be in each other’s presence?”

“I think you know my answer to that.” Henry offered her his arm. “Shall we, My Lady?”

Caroline took his arm, feeling the muscles twitch under her fingers. She could feel the heat coming through his jacket. It made her wish she wasn’t wearing gloves right now. She swallowed, hoping she

didn't trip; her legs felt like they were going to buckle at any moment.

"I know of a path around the edge of the garden that we can use. We won't be interrupted."

"That sounds ominous." Henry peered at her. "What are you up to?"

"I'll explain in a while." Caroline gently tugged him towards the far end of the terrace. "I have some things I need to talk to you about, and I can't do that in front of everyone."

Henry stopped short and stared at her.

"What do you want, Caroline?"

What did she want? Caroline wasn't really sure. She went with the answer she could give.

"I want an explanation. I want to know about what happened before. Is that too much to ask?"

Henry's expression went blank, his jaw hardening.

"You want the truth, don't you?"

“I do.”

“And how do I know you’re going to believe me?”

“You don’t.” Caroline lifted her chin. “All I’m asking is that you trust me. I’m not going to judge you on anything. I just want an explanation.”

Henry stared at her. Then his eyes flicked up to the scar on her forehead, after which he took her hand and turned it over to show the scar across her palm. He sighed and lifted her hand to his mouth, kissing the scar. Caroline started and bit back a gasp. The feel of his lips on her skin sent warm shivers up her arm. She had not thought about what his mouth was like, but she had not been expecting such a soft, gentle touch. It was the complete opposite of what she had expected.

“All right. You asked me to tell you the truth, and you deserve that, at least.” Henry sighed and started walking away. “Show me where we can go. I don’t really want to do this in front of everyone.”

His voice sounded tight. Was he close to tears? Caroline was a little stunned by this. This naval officer, this strong-looking man, was close to tears. That did not fit with what she knew of him at all.

You don’t really know him at all. You only know what you’ve been told and what you made up in your head. You don’t know the real man.

But I want to. I really want to.

They were stepping off the terrace when Sarah appeared, looking bemused that they were even together. She peered at Caroline.

“Caroline, are you all right?”

“I’m perfectly well.” Caroline tried not to glance over at Henry. “Lord Bannock and I are going for a walk.”

“I see.” Sarah arched an eyebrow at Henry. “And you’re all right with that, are you, Henry?”

“Nothing untoward is going to happen, Sarah. Lady Caroline is safe with me.”

“I know she’s safe with you. I’m just surprised that she’s even suggesting being with you alone.” Sarah sighed and nodded towards a nearby path. “Take that path, and you’ll reach an oak tree with a bench underneath. That should be private enough for you.”

“That’s where we were going, Sarah.” Caroline paused. “If anyone needs us, can you come and find us?”

“Of course. Just ...” Sarah hesitated. “Just don’t be stupid, Caroline.”

“I would never do that.”

Sarah walked away, shaking her head, and Henry arched an eyebrow.

“Are you sure you don’t want Sarah with us as a chaperone? It’s more appropriate.”

“I’ll lose my nerve if Sarah’s with us.”

“You make it sound like this is a momentous thing for you.”

“In a way, it is.” Caroline closed her eyes for a moment. “Can we go, please? I’m really going to back out if we don’t find somewhere to talk.”

If Henry kept questioning her, Caroline was going to blurt out what she wanted to ask. She didn’t want to do it in front of everyone when there was a chance she could end up getting emotional. What she had believed for close to a decade was about to change and shatter, and Caroline didn’t really want the other guests staring at them.

Henry looked like he wanted to call Sarah back, his indecision showing. Then he nodded, and they headed along the path. The huge green canopy of vines and bushes twisting around the trellis cast a green glow along the slabs, making them disappear from the rest of the guests. If anyone looked now, nobody would be able to see them. Very inappropriate, Caroline was aware, but she needed to do it. What she had to ask was going to make things shift.

She just wanted to get through this in private.

They walked on in silence until they reached the oak tree in the corner of the garden. It was huge, stretching up further than Caroline remembered. The branches hung low, almost touching the ground. It wasn't until they ducked under the branches that they saw the bench against the tree.

Nobody would know they were there unless they came into the little cocoon created by the tree.

Caroline moved away from Henry and went to the bench, sitting on the edge, feeling even more nervous now.

"Caroline?" Henry stayed where he was, staring at her. "What is it you wanted to talk to me about?"

"A lot." Caroline's voice was croaked. "I have been told a lot about you, and I believed it. Everyone said you were the one who was the troublemaker, that you hurt me, and there was no remorse from you. But since you came back, things have made me question what really happened. And the only person I know who can give me an honest answer is you."

"You would believe my word over everyone else?"

"I just want to hear it from you." Caroline looked up at him. "Just tell me the truth, Henry. Tell me what happened that day when we first met. And then tell me if it wasn't you, why didn't you say a word about it?"

Chapter 14

Henry had suspected that Caroline wanted to be alone with him to confront him. He should have stopped it. This was not something he should be discussing without witnesses. Anyone could come on them right now and assume that he was doing something untoward with Caroline, even with her nowhere within reach.

The guests at Sarah's garden party were more open-minded than the rest of Society, but it wouldn't take long for word to get around. That would just make things worse for him.

He started to turn away.

"We really should not be here alone, Caroline. I think we should go back."

"What are you afraid of?" Caroline's voice stopped him. She didn't shout at him. Her tone was curious. "Are you scared about admitting your guilt?"

"The only ..." Henry swallowed. He didn't turn around. "If anyone comes upon us now, they'll immediately believe the worst of me."

"No one's going to think like that."

"It's happened more than you realise. I've just been lucky."

And that luck was going to run out shortly. Along with his self-control. With a witness, Henry could keep his composure, but when there was no one watching them, he found himself wanting to touch Caroline, hold her as he wanted.

He really should have insisted that Sarah come with them. His mind was twisting things into knots.

“Henry.”

There was a rustling of skirts, and then Henry felt Caroline touch his back. He tensed, but she didn't pull away. Her fingers spread across his back, Henry feeling every movement. He lowered his head and stared at the ground as Caroline moved around him. He saw her feet, her skirts moving, appearing before him, but he didn't look up.

What was it about this woman that made him want her badly and want to run away from her at the same time?

“Henry, look at me.”

Henry started when fingers brushed across his jaw. This made him look up. Caroline stared up at him with those beautiful blue eyes, her expression soft as she stroked his cheek. She wasn't looking at him with anger, an expression he was expecting. She didn't even appear to want to keep her distance.

It took everything he had not to lean into her touch.

“What are you afraid of?” Caroline asked. “Why won’t you tell me the truth?”

“You’ve had an opinion about me for a long time, Caroline. Do you really think me telling you the truth now is going to change it?” Henry swallowed. “Will you even believe the truth?”

“Until last week, I believed what I thought I knew. After what happened and you were so kind towards me, I began to think. And I have doubts.” Caroline lifted her chin, her eyes shining. “I want to hear what happened from you. You’re the one who knows the truth.”

“Will you believe me?”

“I will if you stop stalling.” Caroline didn’t look away, her fingers drifting over his cheek. “Were you the one who scarred me? Or was that James?”

Her fingers were getting very close to his mouth. Henry stepped away. If she kept touching him, he was going to pull her into his arms. He couldn’t do that. Not yet.

“It was James.” It was harder than he expected to say that. “He was the one who tackled you and split your head open.”

“And he was the one who shot at me, wasn’t he?”

“We were both out shooting, and by the time I realised what he was doing ...” Henry drew a shuddering breath. “I thought you were dead when I saw you go down. I cannot believe he did that.”

Caroline nodded. She didn't look surprised. She looked accepting. This was easier than he thought. She brushed a lock of hair off her face and tucked it behind her ear. It was difficult to concentrate when all Henry wanted to do was follow the line of her neck with his mouth.

They really should have someone here.

“Why have you never said anything? Why do you take the blame?”

“In the beginning, I did.” Henry paced away. “Our parents have an outer persona of being kind and generous people. Everyone likes them, but the reality is they're very strict. And they're quick to punish for the slightest offence. They still do. James didn't understand that, so I tried to protect him from the punishments. They weren't something that James could have handled when he was a small boy. I was tougher than he was.”

Henry didn't want to think about the scars he still had on his back and the back of his legs from the caning. Even his fellow sailors had been shocked by them when he was out at sea. Taking his shirt off in any sort of company had been uncomfortable. Henry's back began to throb from the memories.

“You were being a big brother and looking out for him,” Caroline said quietly. “If I had a younger sibling, I would have done the same.”

“Well, be glad that you’re not an older sibling.” Henry grunted. He ran his hands through his hair. “Unfortunately, I underestimated James. He learned very early on how to manipulate people, including me. He made it out that he couldn’t take the punishments, and he would cry about the thought of being caned. So, I took it for him. I put the blame on me. By the time I realised he had set me up and was getting away with it, it was too late. James was doing things that would certainly get him into trouble. Pushing other children around, throwing things at them ...”

He glanced at Caroline. Even across the space between them, he could see the scar on her head. How she had managed to get up and walk away after that, he had no idea. And he felt the pain tighten his chest.

“You and he were so alike as children,” Caroline murmured. “I remember that I couldn’t tell you apart to begin with.”

“Neither could anyone else. And James knew this. He used it to his advantage, and he found that he liked intentionally hurting others.”

“And you always got the blame.”

“He was very good at lying. Still is. My brother is a lost cause.” Henry hung his head. “And my parents adore him. They think he can do no wrong, and I’m the bad son. So whenever something happens, they don’t believe me when I protest my innocence. I still get punished.”

“How did they punish you?”

Henry gritted his teeth. His back felt like it was burning.

“Mostly caning. Across the back. My legs. My ... well, let’s just say I can’t sit down when that happens.”

Caroline whimpered. Henry glanced up and saw the pain in her expression. She looked like she was about to cry. She started towards him, but Henry held up a hand.

“Don’t. Just ... just stay there. I can’t focus when you’re close.”

“All right.” Caroline’s hands twisted together. “The day I was shot by James ... what happened to you? You disappeared after that.”

“I was forced into the navy. Father said he had had enough of me, and I had gone too far by trying to kill you. So, I was packed off to the nearest port and put on the first ship they came to.” Henry stared at his hands. “I never wanted to go into the navy. That was not what I was raised for, but they refused to listen to me. The only way they would be happy was to get me as far away from them as possible where I couldn’t get into trouble. And it was the push that I needed to make something of myself. My fellow sailors recognised a scared boy who had been abused, and they took me on as one of their own. I learned to be on the sea, went up the ranks as I mucked in with everyone else. I served against the French, and I was made a hero by people I considered family.” He sighed. “It’s saying something where people I’ve only known for four years are more like family to me than my own parents.”

Talking about this felt like there was a weight coming off his

shoulders. Outside of those on his ship, Sarah was the only one who really knew the truth. She believed him. Henry had never thought Caroline would hear him out and not call him a liar.

He was going to start crying if he carried on like this.

“What about James?” Caroline asked. “Did he stop when his cover left?”

“As far as I know, yes. But he missed being able to hurt people with no repercussions. So, he enlisted in the army.” Henry snorted. “Because of his position as a duke’s son, he was given an officer’s rank and trained on how to be a soldier. He had a regiment meant to look to him for orders, and from what I heard, he got them all killed in the first battle when he panicked and ran away. He tried to cover it up and said that he called for everyone to fall back, and none heard him. When they realised he was lying after James got to talking too much when he was drunk, James took off again.”

“He deserted?”

“He did. He’s been absent without leave for nearly a year now.”

Caroline stared at him.

“How did you know about this?”

“When we’re in port, soldiers and sailors tend to mix when drinking.

Sometimes, we fight, and sometimes, we talk. The soldier who told me about my brother expected me to get angry and start a fight to defend him. Imagine his shock when I said I wasn't surprised that James did that. And you can imagine the other things they told me about him."

"And your parents know nothing about this?"

"Apparently not. Even if they did, they would say that the army had it out for James. He boasts about having served at some of the battles against the French, but he was often behind the lines until the time he ran away."

His first time in battle, and James ran. He wanted to hurt people without consequences, but the knowledge that he could get hurt in the process scared him. Henry had suspected that his brother was a coward, but not to this extent.

Caroline bit her lip. She looked like she was going to cry.

"So, you've been used to cover for him for years, and James just uses that to his advantage."

"I'm going to be losing my title of Lord Bannock soon because my father believes I should be disinherited. I don't mind losing that – I've got my savings, and I love living at sea now – but I hate the fact that James is going to become the heir. He doesn't deserve it, as far as I'm concerned."

"I believe you."

Henry looked up.

“You do?”

Caroline nodded.

“I do. I can hear the pain in your voice. I know how hard this is to say it and think someone’s going to reject you.” She swallowed. “I didn’t believe you. I believed what everyone else said and formed an opinion. I’m no better than the others.”

“That’s not true.” Henry got to his feet. “You’re better than they are because you’re actually hearing me out. And you believe me. You have no idea how good that makes me feel to know that you believe what I’ve just said.”

“But why?”

“Why what?”

Caroline stared at him with a piercing gaze.

“Why does me believing you mean so much to you? Is it because of what you said last week?”

She meant when he admitted to admiring her, but Henry knew it wasn't just over that declaration.

"It's a lot more than that, Caroline."

"Tell me."

He should have kept his distance. This was opening his heart more than he anticipated. But Henry found himself crossing to Caroline, watching as her eyes widened when he pulled her to him. He cupped her face in his hands.

"Does this give you any indication?"

Then he kissed her.

#

Caroline had not expected Henry to kiss her. She hadn't intended to bring him away from the other guests to do something so intimate, and she should have been pushing him away. This kiss should stop.

But she couldn't. Her hands went to his chest, but instead of pushing him, she grabbed onto his shirt and held on as Henry kissed her, the fierceness at the start easing off to a gentle, beautiful exploration of her mouth. He took control, angling her head to the right position and nibbling at her lips before kissing her more deeply. He did it in such a

painstaking way that Caroline wanted more.

I thought you hated him. You shouldn't be allowing this.

Just a little longer. Just ...

Caroline felt like her legs were going to give way. She leaned on Henry as she wobbled, and Henry's arms went from her head to slide around her. He cradled her like she was a precious gem, his touch building fire in her chest. Even then, Caroline felt herself trembling.

She wanted more. Needed more.

What was happening to her?

Henry broke the kiss and lifted his head. His eyes were so dark they were practically black. He was breathing heavily, his breath tickling her mouth.

"I ... forgive me." He lowered his head and started to step away. "I shouldn't have done that. That was not gentlemanly."

"I didn't protest," Caroline whispered.

"You didn't need to. I know when I've crossed a boundary." Henry gave her a rueful smile. "I was fully expecting you to slap me for

touching you in such a way. I'm still expecting it."

"I ..."

Caroline couldn't do that. She was still reeling from the knowledge that Henry was not the villain everyone painted him to be. And then added to the kiss he had given her ...

It felt like everything had been taken out of position and put elsewhere. Caroline didn't know what was going on.

"Caroline? Henry?"

Henry stepped away quickly and headed towards the bench as there was a rustling of leaves. Her heart still racing, Caroline turned and saw Sarah duck under the branches, catching a stray leaf in her hair. She frowned when she saw them.

"Oh. Forgive me, did I interrupt something?"

"No, you didn't." Henry straightened his jacket. "I think it's safe to say we've cleared the air, so to speak."

Caroline stared at him. Clearing the air was not how she would have described it. Henry had just told her the truth about their past, and then he had to put a cat among the pigeons and kiss her. How was that clearing the air? She just felt even more confused.

"I see." Sarah's face said she didn't look convinced. "There's someone here to see you, Henry. A Teresa Bakersfield. She said that she desperately needs to see you."

"Teresa?" Henry frowned. "Did she give any reason why she's here?"

"No, she didn't. But she's here with her son." Sarah was watching him closely. "She's not leaving until she's spoken to you."

Caroline felt herself go cold. Another woman was here to see Henry? She swallowed.

"Who's Teresa?"

"She used to be one of our upstairs maids. She got pregnant by the man she was due to marry, and then he abandoned her." Henry sighed. "Apparently, Mother said she couldn't have a woman of ill repute working for her and threw her out. Last I heard, she had gone to live with her parents in Cornwall."

"What's she doing here?"

Why are you so invested in knowing? It's not your business.

I know that. But I still want to know.

"I'll have to go and find out." Henry paused with a look in Caroline's direction, the heat flickering in his eyes before it vanished, and he put on a blank expression. He turned to Sarah. "Where is she now?"

"In the library."

"I'll go now. Walk Lady Caroline back, will you? I don't think she should be left alone."

"Of course." Sarah arched a bemused eyebrow. "I'll do that."

Henry grunted. Then he bowed to Caroline, not giving her any eye contact.

"I'll take my leave, My Lady. And thank you for hearing me out. I hope that we can start afresh."

"I ... I hope so, too," Caroline murmured.

Why couldn't she say something better than that? She sounded so timid with that. But the kiss had thrown her even more off-balance, and Caroline was trying to get her footing back. It was a surprise that the world wasn't tilting around her.

Henry stared at her for a moment longer. Then he turned and left, barely glancing at Sarah before he disappeared from sight. As his

footsteps died away, Sarah turned to Caroline, her eyes dancing with anticipation.

“So, what happened? Did he tell you ...?”

“Did he tell me the truth?” Caroline said grimly. “Yes, he did. He told me what James did.”

“And you believed him?”

“I did.”

It was hard not to believe him when she could see the pain and despair at how he had been put aside as his brother got all the attention and had no punishment for anything he did. James had said a few things during their conversations that had not made much sense, and Caroline had been left with questions. But with Henry, he had made sense. Everything was answered.

For the most part. That kiss didn't answer anything but give her more questions. Henry had never shown that he even remotely cared for her in that way. Until last week, she had thought the feeling of hatred was mutual. But he had actually admired her when she was horrible towards him? How did that make any sense?

Her lips were still throbbing from the kiss. Caroline resisted the urge to touch her mouth as she remembered it. Henry had shown some mastery in that, and it had left Caroline wanting more.

She was really struggling with things right now.

“Caroline?”

“Hmm?”

Sarah gestured with her hands.

“What’s wrong with you? You look rather ... odd. Like you’re off in your own world.”

“Oh. I ... I just ...” Caroline rubbed her temples. “I’m feeling a little faint. I might go inside and just sit down for a while.”

“Of course. You know where the best places are. And be aware, your mother is looking for you.”

“What does Mother want?”

“She wants you to meet a few gentlemen and have some introductions.”

Caroline didn’t want to do that. Last year, she had been happy to do that and explore her options. There had been a lot of flirtation, but it had been harmless. Fun, but harmless. This time, she didn’t want to

talk to anyone. Or flirt with any gentleman.

She just wanted to find Henry and figure out what was going on between them. And that shook her. Only a short while ago, she declared that she despised him for what he did. To know that her hatred had been built on lies and Henry actually desired her was not something she had expected.

She needed time alone to figure out what to do.

It didn't take long to get back to the house; the walk back made in silence. Sarah kept glancing over at Caroline. She knew her friend had a few questions about her sudden change, and Caroline wasn't sure she could answer all of them. She didn't even know if she knew the answers. Things were going to be up in the air for a while until she could catch them again.

When they got to the house, the two friends parted ways, Sarah heading across the garden to join the other guests while Caroline ducked into the house. There were a few alcoves she could sit in for a while and get away from everyone. Nobody would find her unless they knew where to look.

She headed along the hallway, intending on going to the music room, where she heard voices to her left. Caroline intended to walk on, but then she recognised Henry's voice. Then she realised she was passing the library.

Where Sarah had told the maid Teresa to wait. The maid with the little boy.

The door was partly open, just a little bit. Caroline knew she should walk away and leave them be – it was not her business – but she found herself drifting closer.

“Your family can’t keep doing this, Lord Bannock!” Teresa’s voice rang out. She sounded distressed. “I went to your house, and your parents refused to let me inside.”

“So why are you here?”

“Because they directed me here. You’re the one paying for Charles, after all.”

Caroline froze. He was paying for a child that wasn’t his? Or was he ...?

Oh, God. No, that couldn’t be right.

Henry sighed heavily.

“I helped you because my brother refused to do so. He’s still refusing to acknowledge that Charles is his son. But while I appreciate your situation, Teresa, I can’t keep helping you forever. Especially if I’m going to be disinherited.”

“You, disinherited? Who’s the title going to, then?”

“Who do you think?”

Someone passed by the gap in the door, and Caroline pulled back abruptly. Then she saw the little boy sitting on the rug playing with a couple of wooden toy soldiers. He couldn't be any older than two years old with black curls and a slim face. He looked like he could easily be Henry's child.

But this was James' son. Caroline had heard Henry say so. James was a father.

And he was abandoning his baby.

“He can't keep avoiding me forever, My Lord,” Teresa cried. “Charles deserves to be acknowledged as a Beaufort.”

“But what can I do about it?”

“You can appeal to your parents! They could legitimise a grandchild of theirs.”

“Not if they think he's mine.”

“I'll be telling them who the father is,” Teresa declared. “They can't ignore that.”

“They can if James denies it, and I know he will. They will believe I’m the father and that I put you up to saying Charles is James’ so they will be kinder.”

Henry sounded so resigned about it. So exhausted. Teresa snorted.

“They can’t do that, can they?”

“They will believe James over anyone else. They’ve been doing that for years.” There was the sound of footsteps. “You need to go to James and tell him to step up. Charles deserves that, at the very least.”

“I’ve tried to find James. He keeps disappearing on me. He won’t see me at all.” Teresa’s voice faltered. “The last time I did see him, he said I would live to regret it.”

“He threatened you?”

“He did.” Teresa’s voice was now shaking. “I don’t know what to do, My Lord. All I want to do is have some security for my son. I want the best for him. Yes, I made the mistake of letting Lord Cornwall’s son seduce me, but I’m trying to fix my mistakes. And Charles needs his father. He shouldn’t be having his necessities paid for by his uncle. That should be coming from his father.”

“I know that, but have you tried telling James to do something that he doesn’t want to do? You’ll be lucky if you get him to stay still right now.”

There was a whimpering sound, and then Caroline heard the rustling of clothes, followed by some muffled sobbing. Then she could hear Henry's gentle tone.

"We'll get things right soon, Teresa. It will just take time. Charles will have a father there for him. I promise."

Now Caroline felt like she was intruding too much. This was not something she needed to hear. Stepping back and trying to keep as quiet as possible, Caroline tiptoed away. This was not her business. Henry didn't need her eavesdropping on him.

Even some people deserved to have some semblance of privacy.

Chapter 15

Seeing Teresa again had been a shock. Henry had thought she was firmly situated in Cornwall with her parents, raising Charles with the money he sent her to help them out. It was the least he could do when he heard that Teresa had a baby by James and his brother wasn't acknowledging the fact he had a child. Charles didn't deserve to be left in the cold because his father was heartless.

The problem was getting James to admit it out loud. For years since Teresa revealed she was pregnant, he had been denying he had anything to do with her, claiming that he wouldn't get involved with the household staff. Since it came to light that one of the maids was going to have a baby, everyone was under the impression that Henry was the father.

Which was ludicrous, given that the only time Henry was home on leave was about the same time Teresa was forced to confess that she was having a baby out of wedlock. He hadn't been around at the time of conception.

But that hadn't mattered. Something had gone wrong, so it was Henry's fault. His parents had expressed their disappointment in him and then washed their hands of the subject. They didn't even mention that they had a grandchild. It was like Charles didn't exist, leaving it to be Henry's mess. His protests that he wasn't the father were just him not accepting responsibility.

All the while, James would sit in the corner with a smirk on his face.

Henry really hated him now.

He couldn't enjoy the party after that. Teresa was in hysterics, and she and Charles had to be taken into the kitchen to calm down. Henry arranged to meet them the next day to give Teresa some money to tide her and Charles over for a few months. He was able to do that for now. Once he was disinherited, that money would be cut dramatically, so Henry wanted to make sure Charles got what he deserved. His nephew deserved better than what he was getting.

After leaving Teresa with the cook and housekeeper, Henry made his excuses to the admiral before taking his leave. It was tempting to go and find Caroline, even if they couldn't finish what they started, but after having Teresa turn up, Henry was sure he wasn't going to be good company. Caroline didn't need him snapping at her.

Not after the confession he had practically given her.

You kissed her. That's not a confession.

It was close enough.

Henry had been coming to terms with his feelings for a long time. It was startling that he would care about a girl who hated him and made no effort to hide it, and yet every thought that involved Caroline Folton had been enough to warm his heart. It was that face and those gorgeous eyes that kept him sane while he was finding his feet in the navy, away from land and alone. The mere thought of her, even if she was angry and shouting at him, got him through the battles. It was like he had a reason to keep himself alive.

It felt ridiculous to be in love with someone who had made their feelings known, and Henry knew it was futile that he would never have the woman he wanted because of James' actions. But it didn't stop him from thinking about Caroline or feeling something for her.

Life was just not fair to him. And giving his heart to Caroline when she wouldn't accept it seemed even more unfair.

Until she accepted his kiss. Now Henry wondered if she would accept his heart. But he had to progress slowly. She might have accepted one kiss, but there was a chance it wouldn't happen again. And if he pushed too much, Henry had a feeling he would have put a massive chasm between them.

Why couldn't things ever be simple?

The house was quiet when Henry returned. The servants had the afternoon off, and his parents had gone to Bath for a fortnight. Apparently, the duchess needed some respite, so they had made arrangements to go to Bath and take the waters for a couple of weeks. Which meant Henry was going to be here alone with hostile servants and his brother.

Maybe he should find somewhere to stay himself for the next two weeks. He didn't fancy being in the same house with James for that long. Something was bound to go wrong.

He could go south and stay at their family house just outside of Penzance. It would be empty right now with just a few servants tending to its upkeep. There was plenty to do down there, and Henry could get the space and respite he needed before he had to go back to his ship.

The only problem was Caroline. She would see it as him abandoning her after what he said. Henry wasn't sure he could invite her without her family, and there wasn't much he could do if they were present. Lord Bingham might be his friend and genial about Henry's past, but even he would object to Henry trying to seduce his daughter.

There was a lot to think about, and Henry was still confused about it as he got home and let himself in by the side door. There was the sound of clinking glasses in the dining room, which Henry didn't pay much attention to initially. It was probably one of the servants who had decided work was more important than an afternoon off.

The dining room door was open as Henry walked past. Then he heard a loud crash. Henry hurried into the room and saw shards of glass across the floor. James was sitting at the head of the table where their father normally sat, a whisky decanter in one hand. There were two other decanters on the table in front of him.

"Ah, good, someone's here." James gestured towards the dresser. "Be a good chap and get me another glass. I'm thirsty."

"I think you've had enough, James."

"What?" James blinked. Then recognition dawned. "Oh, Henry, it's you. I didn't realise you had come back. Did they get bored of you already? I'm not surprised. You're not exactly good company."

"Teresa Bakersfield turned up."

James' expression flickered.

"Did she?"

"She said she's been trying to find you, but you keep avoiding her."

"As I should." James scowled. "I've got nothing to say to her. Now get me a glass."

"I'm not going to get you a glass. You are going to sober up and then clear up this mess. After which, you and I are going to talk about Teresa and your son."

"Not my son." James' words were slurring as he waved the decanter. "I did nothing to that girl. I don't know why you believe her."

"Because Charles is the exact image of both of us!" Henry snapped. "I certainly didn't take her to bed. You were here at the time she would have got pregnant. I know you're a bit slow when it comes to mathematics, but you're not that slow."

James sniggered.

"You've paid for that brat. You've provided what is necessary. I'd say that was pretty self-explanatory, don't you?"

"I'm providing for my nephew because you refuse to!" Henry shouted. He was still upset from hearing what Teresa said, and now he was listening to his brother trying to worm his way out of it. Again. "Just over three years ago, you got Teresa pregnant and didn't admit to it when Teresa had to face Mother and Father alone. Eighteen months ago, your son was born, and you and our parents decided that he doesn't exist. I'm the only one who actually cares about him! I'm the one who pays for him and makes sure that Teresa doesn't go without because that's what family does."

"That's what a father does."

"I'm not Charles' father!" Henry bellowed.

He stormed across the room and slapped at the half-empty decanter. It left James' hand and slid across the table, sending whisky sloshing everywhere. Henry grabbed James by the shirt and hauled him to his feet, shaking him hard. James groaned.

"Stop that, Henry. I feel sick."

"Serves you right. You shouldn't have drunk so much. And I was only gone an hour!" Henry snarled into James' face. "You have messed things up your whole life, and you made sure my life was miserable. I was being a big brother and protecting you, and you took that to mean you could do whatever you wanted. You ruined my life, and now you're going to ruin your son's. He's a child! He doesn't deserve that!"

"I have a life to live, and I'm going to do it my way." James pushed

Henry away, adjusting his shirt and smoothing down his hair. He looked a little less drunk. "I didn't make you protect me from Mother and Father, but you did. I didn't make you go into the navy; I didn't make you provide for my child, and I didn't make you feel in love with a woman who doesn't want you."

"You leave Caroline out of this!"

"Why should I? We had a competition, remember?"

"Which you're losing," Henry shot back. "After you assaulted her at the ball, she wants nothing to do with you. And I don't blame her. No woman should be treated like that."

"And you think you've won, do you?" James sneered. "I can get her back. All I need to do is turn on the charm, and she'll be putty in my hands."

"Even if you stopped drinking long enough to do that, I highly doubt it." Henry looked at the empty decanters. "Why are you even drinking this much, anyway? What's happened for you to become an inebriate?"

"That's none of your business."

"I think it is."

Henry tried to think what could have made James turn to the bottle.

As far as he was aware, nothing untoward had happened at home. So it had to be from an outside source. Then he remembered the morning before their dinner party that Caroline and Sarah had come to. James had taken a letter off the pile left by his father's plate at breakfast and read it. Henry had questioned him about opening his father's mail, to which James had said it was none of his business. Then his face went white, and he had left with the letter. Lord Cornwall wasn't any the wiser that someone had messed around with his letters; Henry had a feeling he would be blamed, even though it was in his brother's possession.

What could possibly have him so spooked that he was drinking heavily?

"The army is catching up with you, aren't they? The Cavalry Staff Corps are looking for you to bring you back for your court-martial."

James didn't immediately respond, but he did tense up. That had to be it. The army had written to notify the Duke of Cornwall that his son had deserted and they were looking for him. It wouldn't be long until they had officers from their infamous Cavalry Staff Corps coming to escort him back. A deserter couldn't be on the run forever. Once the duke and duchess found out about this, they would be devastated. Their image of a perfect son in James would be completely shattered.

Henry wanted to feel glee that James would get some comeuppance soon and that the truth would come out eventually, but all he could feel was exhaustion. James just sucked all the energy out of him.

"How long have you got until you get picked up?"

"Two weeks. Just before Mother and Father get back." James waved a

hand. “But I’ll be gone before then. I’ve got a ticket for safe passage over to America. I’ll be leaving within the week.”

“You’re really going to run away from your problems?”

“Of course I can. You’ll take the blame for everything. As always.” James sniggered. “You always were the perfect scapegoat.”

Henry snarled and punched him, knocking James back into his chair. Then he pointed at the mess on the table and the floor.

“Clear this mess up. The servants aren’t going to like this when they get back. If they ask about it, I’ll be pointing them in your direction.”

“As if they’ll believe that you didn’t do it.”

“Considering I’m the one who’s sober out of the two of us, I think I’ll be believed.” Henry turned away. “Clear up this mess, and clear up yourself. You can’t keep running away from your troubles. It’ll only get worse for you.”

He left the room before James could respond, heading towards the stairs. It felt like his head was splitting open.

Caroline woke late the next morning, and she lay in bed staring at the ceiling. She hadn't slept very well, tossing and turning as her mind just wouldn't settle. All she could think about was Henry and the kiss. Something that she should have stopped.

But she didn't. And now it was invading everything, including her dreams.

Caroline didn't want to think about the erotic dreams that had crept up on her during the night. More times than she could count, she found Henry in bed with her, kissing his way down her naked body. Or out in the fields as he took her clothes off and made love to her.

Or even on a beach, Henry pulling her into the waves and bringing her to pleasure as the water washed over them on the shore. Each scenario was more erotic than the one before, and they all had Caroline waking up, covered in sweat and out of breath. She had run out of water in her washbasin, trying to cool herself down.

That kiss had completely tipped her over the edge. She had to be going mad that a simple and very beautiful kiss would have her thinking about something more. That wasn't going to happen, no matter what her mind thought.

No matter what she had felt when Henry was holding her before. She was naive when it came to anything meant to be between a married couple firmly in the bedroom, but she wasn't stupid. She was sure that the hardness pressing against her as Henry focused on her mouth was something that was part of it, and it left her in no doubt as to what Henry wanted.

He wanted her. Preferably without the restraints of her corsets and

without the worry of being caught. Caroline had a feeling if they had really been in private, Henry would have taken her to the ground or pressed her against the tree while reaching under her skirts.

And that had been part of her dreams as well.

Caroline couldn't begin to count how many times she had cursed Henry for putting her in this position. A kiss should not have done this to her.

But that could mean something. Maybe that you've desired Henry for a while. It would explain why you didn't push him away.

It was just a wave of emotions. Nothing more.

Or was it? Caroline didn't know what to think anymore.

She needed to get up and show her face. Her mother would be wondering where she had gone, and her maid was going to come looking for her soon. Lady Bingham liked everyone to have breakfast at the same time, and that time was about now. Caroline groaned when she saw the clock.

Rolling out of bed, she fumbled with the clothes the maid had left out for her and got dressed. She managed to get her corset tightened and fixed her dress over it. God, Caroline hated corsets. They were a nightmare, and they just made Caroline feel like everything was being squeezed out of her body. She had seen people with corsets so tight they had tiny waists, but everything else was large. She had no idea how that was attractive.

Henry would probably like her without a corset. Or without any clothes.

Caroline wiped that out of her mind and left the room, trying not to look at the bed and see the previous scenes from the night before. It was like Henry had imprinted himself everywhere, and he hadn't even been in her bedchamber.

The man was insufferable. And Caroline couldn't bring herself to be angry about it.

Her parents were already in the dining room when Caroline entered, both of them halfway through their breakfast. Bingham was reading the newspaper, squinting behind his eyeglasses, while Lady Bingham was going through the pile of letters at the side of her plate. She looked up and frowned when she saw her daughter.

"Good morning, dear. You're up late today."

"I had a bad night's sleep." Caroline went to Bingham and kissed his cheek. "Good morning, Father."

"Good morning, Caroline. There's plenty of food left. I'm sure you're hungry."

Caroline was surprised to find that she was. Normally, she had some toast and a couple of eggs, but this morning she was putting sausages,

fried potatoes, and tomatoes on her plate. She hadn't realised she was so hungry.

Maybe thinking about making love to a naval officer is a good way to entice an appetite.

Don't start! Not now.

Trying to keep her thoughts neutral, Caroline sat across from her mother and began to eat. She didn't plan to do anything today. She would spend the day writing back to a couple of her friends and then hide in the library with a book. There were no invitations to go to someone for tea, and there were no dinner parties. For once, it was a quiet, slow day.

Caroline needed it. It might help her to figure out which way to go forward.

"Oh, look at this!" Lady Bingham was looking at a letter with a surprised expression. Bingham lowered his newspaper.

"What is it, dear?"

"It's from Lord Bannock. He's asking for Caroline to join him for dinner tomorrow night."

Caroline dropped her fork, and it clattered against her plate. Lady Bingham flinched.

“Do be careful, Caroline!”

“Forgive me, Mother.” Caroline put her cutlery down before she dropped it again. “Is this a dinner party his parents have arranged?”

“Didn’t you hear? They’ve gone to Bath for a fortnight. Lord Bannock and Lord Beaufort are going to be at the house.” Lady Bingham sighed. “Although I don’t know what I think about that. Those two get into scraps so much, even at their age.”

“Lord Beaufort is a pain in the neck.” Bingham grunted. “He’s never been given proper boundaries or put on the right track to be a gentleman.”

“After what Caroline told me what he did that night, I’m now inclined to agree.” Lady Bingham shook her head. “I wish I had known about him in the beginning. If I had, I wouldn’t have pushed Caroline towards him. I thought he was the better option.”

“He was never the better option, dear. I did warn you that it was going to end with someone getting hurt, and Caroline almost was.” Bingham growled. “If I had been around when I saw that brigand grabbing my daughter, I wouldn’t have been responsible for my actions.”

“Oh, Father.” Caroline reached over and touched his arm. “Don’t be angry about it. That moment has passed, and Lord Bannock was there to get me away from his brother. I was safe.”

“That I’m glad of.” Bingham’s expression softened as he looked at his daughter. “I couldn’t think of anyone better to watch out for you.”

Caroline didn’t know what to say to that. She was aware that Henry and Bingham were friends and that Bingham always had a good word to say about the younger man. She had found it ridiculous that her father couldn’t see how awful Henry was, but now her opinion was shifting. She could see what Bingham had seen all along.

Henry was a good person. A wounded soul, a neglected son, but a good person.

I bet he didn’t kiss your father like he kissed you, though.

Stop it!

“Well, you might not have found it surprising, but I did.” Lady Bingham snorted. “I’ve always been led to believe that Lord Bannock is one of the worst people alive. His parents certainly don’t have anything good to say about him.”

“That’s because they have a clear favourite in Lord Beaufort. Lord Bannock was always going to be the one worse off.”

“They had everyone convinced that he was a bad person. If Caroline had told me that Lord Bannock was the one who accosted her and tried to assault her that night, I would have believed it.” Caroline’s mother shook her head. “Never did I expect her to say he was the one

who sent his brother off.”

“Henry ... I mean, Lord Bannock ...” Caroline corrected herself when she saw both parents looking at her strangely, “has always lived in his brother’s shadow. He’s a decorated war hero, and he looks after those around him when he doesn’t need to.”

“But you were prepared to hate him at the start of the Season,” Lady Bingham pointed out. “You’ve hated him for a decade.”

“Because I believed he was the one who hurt me intentionally. I know otherwise.” Caroline picked up her cutlery and tried to focus on eating. “Are you going to tell me that I can’t go to this dinner?”

“On the contrary, I was going to say that you could go.”

Caroline’s head snapped up.

“Mother?”

“However, your father and I are going to be busy tomorrow night, so if you go with Lady Lakeford as your companion, you shouldn’t need us to attend as well.”

Caroline stared. She had not expected her mother to say something like this. She had pretty much stuck to Caroline’s side the day before at the garden party, introducing her to many gentlemen. Caroline was exhausted after the fifth introduction and had almost begged to leave

as she didn't want to talk to anyone anymore. Only Sarah rescuing her and suggesting Caroline needed to rest stopped Lady Bingham from making her daughter keep up the conversation until she collapsed.

It was like the revelation of Henry and his kiss had taken a lot of her energy.

Now her mother was agreeing to let her and Henry be, essentially, alone for dinner. After she made comments that Henry wasn't the nicest person and she wouldn't want to be in his presence if she could help it.

The sudden turnaround was a little bewildering.

"Why are you so agreeable to this, Mother?" Caroline asked. "Aren't you questioning why Lord Bannock wants to have dinner with me?"

"I don't need to question it. I know why he wants dinner with you." Lady Bingham smiled. "Lord Bannock is sweet on you. And as he's the only offer I've seen for you lately, it's best to get on with nurturing this offer."

Caroline knew her mouth had dropped open. She couldn't believe her mother was talking about potential marriage like she was talking about the weather. That didn't sound right.

"This is all about an offer for my hand, is it?" she demanded. "Even after all these years believing he's a terrible person, you're actually changing your mind and considering him as a potential husband?"

“I will admit that I was hasty in my decisions about him, which did come from his parents. But we do need to take whatever match we can get. And it’ll be beneficial for our family if you marry the son of a duke. When Lord Cornwall dies, he’ll become the new duke.” Lady Bingham beamed. “And you’ll be a duchess.”

Caroline didn’t bother pointing out that Henry was in danger of being disinherited. If they got married now and he had the title taken away later, they would have nothing. Not quite, as she would be the wife of a naval officer.

That actually sounded better than being a duchess. She could handle being the wife of Lieutenant Beaufort rather than the Duchess of Cornwall.

Why was she even thinking about that? She was still trying to understand why she was in turmoil about Henry. Thinking about marriage was a big leap.

Wasn’t it?

Chapter 16

Henry was a few minutes late to leave the house. James had not cleaned up in the dining room, and the butler had to corner Henry as he came downstairs to scold him about leaving the room in such a mess. Normally, Henry would simply nod and get on with it as arguing with the servants wasn't something he wanted to do, but this time he didn't care.

He had told the other man that he was not the one who made a mess, and he wasn't about to clear up after his brother again. The butler had spluttered at this and tried to turn it back around on Henry, but he couldn't do that. Henry told him to scold James the same way, and if he couldn't, then he should get a move on with cleaning up as he wasn't about to do it himself.

It had felt really good to walk away from that. Henry even had a slight bounce in his step as he left the house, taking the letter he had written with him. He didn't trust any of the servants to deliver the invitation to Caroline's house, and he was passing on the way into the village, so it wouldn't take much to stop and drop it off.

The carriage didn't take long to get ready, so Henry was only hanging around for a few minutes before they were on their way. It did feel better getting out of the house before James got up. Henry had no idea what his brother did after he left the dining room, but it was definitely not clearing up. Again, James had walked away from his responsibilities. He just wouldn't accept that he was a grown man, and he needed to do that.

Henry wasn't shocked at that, but he was shocked that James was planning to run away to America to keep from being caught by the army for his desertion. That was a big decision, and he had no idea

how his brother was going to work that out with their parents. How was he going to explain that he was leaving for another country and never coming back? Even the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall were going to start asking questions.

His lies were getting out of control, and Henry had a feeling things were going to get even worse before James even admitted that he was doing wrong. And, even then, he would find a way to pin the blame on Henry.

He had been doing that for years.

The carriage passed by the Bingham estate, and Henry managed to snag a young lad as he was walking by the house. Giving the boy a gold coin, he gave him the letter and said there would be a second gold coin if he did it quickly. He didn't want to be seen going up the driveway himself; otherwise, he would end up being invited inside. Henry wasn't sure if he was ready to see Caroline just yet after his confession.

But you didn't confess, did you? You just kissed her.

That was pretty much an indication of how I felt. She had to realise that.

And if she didn't?

Henry didn't want to think about that right now. He needed to get himself prepared for dinner tomorrow night. Caroline and her parents would be coming over, and Henry was in the process of making arrangements to keep James out of the house. He didn't want his

brother getting drunk and getting in the way. If he were lucky, James wouldn't find out the reason why. In his brother's mind, they were still having a competition to get Caroline to fall in love.

As far as Henry was concerned, James had lost. Unless Caroline rejected him, and then both of them would have lost.

The boy he had sent to deliver the letter came back very quickly, slightly out of breath, and beaming as Henry gave him a second gold coin. He skipped off as the carriage started off again and headed into the village, pulling up outside a small tearoom next to the church. Henry could see Teresa had already arrived, sitting at a table by the window with a cup of tea and wearing a sombre grey dress. There was no sign of Charles.

Henry alighted the carriage and looked up at the driver.

"I won't be long. Wait outside the blacksmith's for me."

"Yes, My Lord."

The carriage pulled away as Henry entered the tearoom. Teresa looked up as he approached, and Henry could see how pale she was. Her eyes were bloodshot, and there were tear tracks on her cheeks. His heart went out to her. She had been wronged in so many ways, and there was barely anyone to help her.

"Lord Bannock."

Teresa started to get up, but Henry stopped her.

“Don’t, Teresa. There’s no need to stand for me.”

“But it’s proper, sir!”

“I think that can be ignored, seeing as we’re technically family now.” Henry sat across from her. “Where’s Charles?”

“Mrs Lacey is looking after him. Her grandson is over this morning, and she asked if Charles could stay behind to play with him.” Teresa swallowed. “Charles doesn’t get to play with many children. Because he ... of his birth and status, nobody wants to be around him.”

“I can understand that’s difficult.”

“It wouldn’t be so difficult if James would accept and acknowledge him,” Teresa said bitterly.

“I know.” Henry reached into his pocket and brought out a thick brown packet. He placed it on the table. “This is for you. It should keep you and Charles going until Charles is about to become a man himself, providing you’re careful with your money.”

Teresa stared at the parcel with wide eyes, her mouth open. Henry could see her trying to figure out how to react. While Teresa was staring at the parcel, he signalled for the young lady at the counter.

“Can I have a coffee, please? Black, no sugar.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“I ... that ...” Teresa spluttered. “That’s far too much, Lord Bannock! I can’t accept that!”

“You can accept it. I’m not going to miss the money, so you don’t need to worry about it being a dent in my own bank account.”

“But ... you gave me much less before. Why are you giving me all this now?”

“I was planning on giving you the same before, and then James told me that he was planning on leaving the country.”

“What?” Teresa stared. “He’s leaving? Where? When?”

“Soon. And he plans to go to America.” Henry shook his head. “The army is after him. If they find him, he’s going to be court-martialed.”

“But what do his parents say? Surely, they have something to say about what’s going on?”

“They have no idea. They believe James is a hero and not a coward who ran away and let his entire regiment die.”

Teresa swallowed. She looked like she was going to cry.

“And I thought he was a charming, handsome young man who couldn’t do any wrong. He made me believe that he was a loyal person. And I learned the hard way.”

“You were young as well. You didn’t know.”

“I was seventeen! I should have known better than to go to bed with my employer’s son. But he wooed me with his words, left me sweet notes, and when he touched me, I just forgot myself.”

“I know. You’re as much a victim as Charles is.”

“Your parents didn’t care. They tried to put the blame on you.”

“I remember that.”

Henry had been shocked and outraged that he was being accused of getting Teresa pregnant. He hadn’t even been present until the day before Teresa had been forced to reveal that she was carrying James’ child. His knowledge of anatomy and how a baby came into the world was limited, but even he knew a woman didn’t get a big belly a few hours later. His parents had to know that as well.

He had been there when James came in and denied that he was the father of Teresa's baby, despite her insistence. Henry had seen Teresa crumble, and he had been the one to pick her up and take her out of the room while his mother said Teresa needed to pack her bag and get out. He had promised to make sure his nephew was looked after.

And he had followed through. Teresa had been grateful, but she had expressed her desire that James grew up and acknowledged that Charles was his. Looking at the little boy, there was no doubt they were related.

James had a son and a woman who, despite her anger towards him, was prepared to love him through all his flaws, and he was throwing it all away. The fact that Teresa was a servant and he was a nobleman didn't bother her; she would have put up with everything if he would actually say publicly that he had a boy.

But instead, James dug his heels in and said the child was Henry's. Even their parents thought so. Henry hadn't even been in the country at the time, and he was still blamed. Giving Teresa money certainly didn't help their belief on who the parent was, but someone had to provide for Charles. He was a Beaufort, after all.

"I don't know what to say, Lord Bannock." Teresa reached out for the parcel and then froze with her fingers hovering over it. "I feel like I can't take this. This is far too much."

"It will make sure you and Charles are cared for until Charles is old enough to care for you. I can even direct you to a bank that you can put it in. I know a couple of bank managers who would be happy to help." Henry nodded his thanks at the girl who placed his coffee in

front of him. “And it will save you coming all the way up here every year to get your yearly allowance.”

“Trying to get rid of me as well, are you?”

“I’m not, and you know it. I just want to make things easier for you.”

“I know.” Teresa bit her lip. “I just wish it hadn’t come to this. I had expected to marry someone I loved and have a large family. Instead, I’m ostracised by people because I was seduced; my parents are disappointed in me and barely interact with me while I live with them, Charles’ grandparents refuse to admit that he exists, and James just won’t grow up.”

“From the way James has been lately, I don’t see him growing up anytime soon.” Henry picked up his cup and took a sip. “He tried to get me into a competition to win the heart of our neighbour. Someone who openly dislikes me.”

“Do you mean Lady Caroline Folton? I seem to remember there was a problem with her that had you leaving.”

“I was made to leave. And yes, it was her.”

Teresa shook her head.

“I really hope Lady Caroline tells James where to go. I don’t want to see him do that to someone else. And if Lady Caroline gets with child,

she could be forced to marry him.”

“Which James won’t let happen if he’s leaving the country.”

“He could take Caroline with him.”

Henry snorted.

“Not a chance. Caroline won’t go anywhere with him.”

The thought of Caroline choosing James and leaving with him left Henry cold. He couldn’t bear to think about that. While he was confident Caroline would never have anything to do with James after what happened, a part of him was always scared it could happen. After what he just confessed to Caroline, he couldn’t see her leave.

You didn’t completely confess, did you? You didn’t tell her that you love her.

She wasn’t ready for it.

“Lord Bannock?” Teresa was frowning at him. “Are you all right? You went a little ... odd.”

“Did I? Forgive me.” Henry put his coffee cup down. “I guess I was trying not to think about my brother with Lady Caroline. That’s not a

good pairing.”

“I agree there,” Teresa murmured. She looked down at the parcel. “It feels like you and I are prisoners to whatever he does. And we can’t seem to get rid of him.”

Henry didn’t know what to say to that. But it sounded like an accurate description.

#

“Caroline?”

Caroline turned. Her father was crossing the library towards her. He looked like he had fallen asleep at his desk, his hair stuck up on one side, and there were red lines across his cheek. Caroline had to smile at the sight.

“Did you close your eyes for a few moments again, Father?”

“I was upright when I closed them.” Bingham rubbed his cheek and tried to smooth down his hair. “I swear I didn’t fall asleep on my papers.”

“I believe you.” Caroline turned away and looked out at the garden. “The clouds are getting darker. I think we’re going to have a storm soon.”

“Hopefully, it’ll hold off until you’ve arrived at Cornwall’s estate. You don’t want to get caught in that.”

Caroline could agree with that. She liked watching the rain, but she didn’t like being out in it. Rain was cold and wet, and she didn’t fancy shivering away in soaking wet clothes indoors. From the look of it, the storm would hold off until later in the evening.

Hopefully, it wouldn’t strand her and Sarah at Henry’s home. Storms around the area tended to be quite intense, and flooding could happen very quickly. Caroline didn’t want their carriage caught in a puddle that was deeper than they anticipated. The idea of being stranded in her carriage didn’t sit well with her.

But it would be better than being stranded with Henry, where they were going to be in close quarters for longer than Caroline had planned. She could manage for a couple of hours and dinner, but more than that, and she was going to panic. Not about Henry; he had shown that he could show her the respect and care that she deserved. He would never hurt her, and that was humbling.

It was herself that she was worried about. She hadn’t been able to wipe Henry and those erotic dreams from her mind, and now all she could think about was getting Henry alone. This was very bad thinking, and she shouldn’t even be considering it. Only a few weeks ago, she couldn’t bear to be in the same room as him. The sudden change in her attitude was scary.

That kiss. It was always about that kiss. Caroline had suspected that it was Henry’s way to sway her opinion on him. He needed something to tip her over and see him differently. But the moment Caroline thought that she dismissed it immediately. She had seen the surprise in

Henry's eyes after he kissed her. He hadn't expected to do that. It was done on impulse.

Would he kiss her on impulse again? Or would he be more reserved and focused on the conversation and company? Sarah was going to be present as well, so while she was very open-minded, doing anything more than touching hands was going to have her objecting as well.

Why was she so focused on getting another kiss? Caroline felt like she had gone mad. It was giving her a headache.

"Darling?"

"Hmm?"

Bingham was frowning at her.

"Are you well? You look like you're deep in thought, and it's causing a lot of pain."

Caroline hadn't realised that was happening. She thought about denying it and lying, but she couldn't lie to her father. She had talked to him about everything when she was younger, and Bingham understood her as much as Sarah did. She swallowed.

"I ... I'm conflicted, Father. I don't know what to do."

Bingham's expression softened. He pressed a hand to her back.

"Talk to me, Caroline. I feel like you don't do that anymore."

"Forgive me, Father. A lot has happened lately." Caroline sagged onto the window seat. "I'm nervous about tonight."

"Why are you nervous?"

"Because ..." God, could she really say it? Caroline stared at the floor. "I think I'm falling for Henry Beaufort."

Bingham didn't answer for a moment. Then he sighed and sat beside his daughter.

"I was beginning to wonder when you were going to admit to it."

"What?" Caroline stared. "What do you mean by that?"

"I've noticed how you changed after you were accosted by Lord Beaufort. The way you spoke about his brother was different. Slightly softer. Almost bewildered. Then you went to Sarah's garden party earlier in the week, and it's like you've been in a daze. Whenever Lieutenant Beaufort is brought up, a light comes into your eyes before you recover and shut down."

“Do ... you mean that ... that I am in love?”

“If you’re not, you’re very close now.”

Caroline had thought this would be a big revelation and that her father would be shocked. But he wasn’t. He seemed to have accepted it long before she did. She still hadn’t accepted it.

“You don’t mind that I might have feelings for Lieutenant Beaufort? I know you and he are friends, but with everything between us ...”

“Lieutenant Beaufort, or Lord Bannock, whichever way you want to address him, is a good lad. He’s been on the short end of things all his life, and even when he gets something for himself, it gets taken away from him. He can’t even enjoy his decorations at war without his parents ignoring him.”

“He’s wanted his parents’ approval for years, hasn’t he?”

“Very much so. I think that’s why he comes to me.” Bingham shrugged. “He just needs a father figure to talk to, and I like that he chooses me to be one.”

Caroline surveyed her father curiously.

“You’ve been on his side since the beginning, haven’t you?” she murmured.

“I have. I saw the man Henry could be and what he grew into. He deserves a lot more than what little he’s given.” Bingham smiled and squeezed Caroline’s hand. “I noticed how he was around you that day when you came in with that gash on your leg. He was so gentle with you in a way I had never seen before. He was very reluctant to leave you, and I had to practically drag him out the house.”

“Oh.”

Bingham tilted his head as he regarded his daughter.

“Has he told you the truth about his brother? Because I can’t see you changing your mind about him unless he actually did that.”

“He did. He told me everything.”

And then some. Caroline felt her face getting warm at the memory of the kiss. She had played it over and over so many times it was imprinted in her mind. If only she had been able to pull him back. She found herself desiring more than she should.

“Caroline?” Bingham was peering at her. “Something else happened, didn’t it?”

“What makes you think something did?”

“Because you went very quiet. And your face is going red.” Bingham tapped her nose with his finger. “I know you by now, darling daughter. Something else happened when he told you.”

Caroline felt a moment of panic. What would her father say to this? He couldn't be happy that his daughter forgot the proper social etiquette of Society. She swallowed.

“Lieutenant Beaufort ... he kissed me. And I ... I let him.”

It took a moment before Bingham responded, sitting back in the window seat.

“Ah. I see. I had a feeling it was something like that.”

“You guessed it?”

“Like I said, I know you. And I suspected that Lieutenant Beaufort would have made his feelings clear to you once you heard the truth and accepted it. Holding your love back for someone who feels the opposite is really difficult.”

Caroline wasn't sure what she should have felt telling her father about the kiss, but shock at his reaction had not been one of the many emotions she thought would come up. She stared at him.

“But ... we only met twice before he was sent away. How could

anyone form an opinion after that?"

"You formed an opinion on him after one meeting, didn't you? It's pretty much what happened to Lieutenant Beaufort, although he went the other way." Bingham's mouth twitched. "I can't imagine how he felt holding a torch for you when you made it clear you didn't like him. That had to be painful."

Caroline groaned.

"What am I going to do now, Father? I can't be in close quarters with him after that. Not without you there."

"You really want me to be present with you?"

"Yes. You could keep things on an even keel, and I can keep myself sane."

Bingham sighed.

"I'm afraid your mother and I have other plans already set, but Sarah's going to be there. And I know Lord Beaufort is going to be gone for the night, so you won't have to worry about him intruding."

"I want you to be there, though," Caroline protested.

"I know, darling." Bingham patted her hand. "But you'll be fine. You're both in love, and being in each other's company isn't going to hurt. Maybe it will help both of you relax."

"Relax?"

"Yes, relax. Being in love isn't a crime. Even after spending a decade hating him. Feelings change all the time. It's perfectly normal." Her father got to his feet with a grunt. "I think you had better get yourself prepared to go out. Sarah is going to be here soon, and you're not ready yet."

"Oh." Caroline looked down at herself. "Of course. I forgot."

"Considering you were staring out at the clouds, I'm not surprised. And Caroline," Bingham kissed her forehead, "don't fret too much. You're going to be fine. It's not the end of the world."

But it did feel like Caroline was teetering on the edge. She was still trying to gather her thoughts together to get them in some sort of order. It was horrible that she didn't feel in control. Where was the confidence from the last Season? The confidence that had helped her flirt with several young men and kept herself carefree? It seemed to have completely vanished knowing that she would be in a house with Henry with a storm approaching.

If they were lucky, the storm wouldn't hit until after they left and Caroline was home. Because the tension in her stomach was going to get even more uncomfortable if she was in Henry's company more than she was prepared for.

When she was a little girl, Caroline had thought that when she fell in love, she would be happy, carefree, and feel like she was walking on clouds. Instead, she was unsure and scared. Was it because these were new emotions, or because it was regarding someone she had hated for years? Caroline didn't know what to think.

She just knew she didn't want to be alone with Henry until she had her thoughts in some sort of order that she could control.

Chapter 17

Henry sat across from Caroline, watching her as she frowned over the cards in her hands. She had been looking at them for quite a while now, and there seemed to be some struggling over which ones to choose. But Henry didn't mind. He was just enjoying watching her.

She did look particularly lovely tonight, wearing a dress in dark red silk and her hair piled up on her head. Henry couldn't take his eyes off that swanlike neck. He really wanted to trail that neck of hers with his lips.

Thinking like that got him aroused, and Henry had to fight it back down. Not a good idea to let his emotions get the better of him when he was trying to entertain her and Sarah for the evening. And the evening had been going very well, even with his sudden thoughts of wondering if he could get Caroline alone threatening to take over. From the way Sarah kept grinning at him, she suspected what he was thinking about.

He needed to focus; otherwise, he would end up embarrassing himself by saying the wrong thing.

When Caroline had arrived with just Sarah in tow – Henry had been surprised at that as he had expected Lord and Lady Bingham – she had been a little nervous. It was like they were meeting for the first time again, which had felt rather strange.

Henry could tell that Caroline was keeping herself cool and closed off, with Sarah having to carry on the conversation. While Henry was glad to see his friend, he had hoped to talk to Caroline instead. That was

what he brought her here for, simply to get to know her better. Even with what was going on between them, he realised he needed to understand her more.

It had taken a while for Caroline to relax and begin to talk without watching what she was saying. Henry had been worried until she started to talk. With gentle prompts from Sarah, they were able to talk and keep the conversation flowing. Henry was very surprised at the knowledge Caroline possessed. She loved the classics, much like him, and she had a love for history. Again, just like Henry. And soon, she was hanging onto his every word as he talked about his time at sea. The stories were not that flamboyant, and Henry didn't see any of his time exciting unless he was in a battle, but it felt like Caroline was interested in all of it. She never took her eyes off him as he talked about almost getting shipwrecked on an island off the coast of Africa or when they ended up encountering pirates in the Atlantic Ocean. No other woman had found his boring stories fascinating.

She was really relaxed and smiling more by the time dinner was being cleared away. And Henry was feeling better about himself as well. He had taken a gamble at inviting Caroline over for dinner in an attempt to get to know her properly. His mind was made up regarding her, but Henry wanted her to be more at ease with him.

When he finally admitted his feelings and asked for her hand in marriage, Henry wanted her to be ready to run into his arms and not want to leave. At the moment, he wasn't sure she was quite there yet. Not without a wobble.

“Henry?”

“Hmm?”

Henry looked up. Sarah was sitting next to him with her own cards. She nodded at the table.

“Caroline’s put her cards down already. It’s your turn.”

“What? Oh, right.”

Henry felt his face getting warm as he checked his cards. He had been so wrapped up in watching Caroline that he hadn’t realised she had made a move. His mind was drifting all over the place.

“You know, this game would be much easier with another person.” Caroline reached for her glass and took a sip of water. “Playing with three was harder than I expected.”

“Well, I did invite your parents,” Henry pointed out. “If they were here, then we would have had four people.”

“But then you wouldn’t have me here,” Sarah said sweetly. “And I’m far more interesting than Lord and Lady Bingham.”

Caroline gasped.

“Sarah, you’re talking about my parents!”

“Well, just Lady Bingham, then.”

Henry burst out laughing as Caroline spluttered. He reached out and touched her hand, ignoring the tingling in his hand as he brushed over her gloved fingers.

“Don’t blow up, Caroline. Sarah’s just teasing. As for getting another person to play, Sarah,” Henry sat back and selected his cards, placing them on top of Caroline’s, “you can ask one of the servants to play, or we can see if James will decide to go against his plans and make an appearance.”

Caroline stiffened, and Sarah winced.

“On second thought, I think playing with three works better.”

“Good.”

Henry was just glad that James hadn’t come back to the house. He had had a word with a couple of contacts, and they had planned to get James away until the morning, at the very earliest. James had got word earlier in the day that the army was on the way to find him, and he needed to hide out for a while. James had been distraught and scared, running around like a madman. For a moment, Henry had felt a little sympathy for his brother; having official people coming after you like that had to be terrifying. He would be feeling the same if he were in this situation.

But he wanted James to be distracted and away from the house while he had dinner with Caroline. He could have allowed James to stay,

but his drinking wasn't good, and James would monopolise the conversation. He would make it all about himself, and Henry didn't want to ruin everything by having his little brother there. Cruel, but necessary. And from the way Caroline had reacted once she knew James wasn't going to be there, she looked like a huge weight had come off her shoulders.

James' absence was becoming a good thing for everyone.

A roll of thunder made the women jump, Sarah giving out a little squeak. Henry looked towards the window and realised that it had got much darker than he remembered. At this time of the evening, the light only started to fade away and day turned into night. It had never gone this quickly. Then the thunder roll sounded again, and he began to hear the sound of rain coming down. A moment later, the world outside looked awash with water.

Caroline groaned.

"Oh, no! I was hoping that wouldn't happen until we were home."

"Me as well." Sarah slapped her cards down with a sigh. "I'm not looking forward to going home in that. My brothers are the ones who are supposed to get wet in weather like this, not me."

Henry chuckled.

"I'm sure they'll be delighted to hear you say that, Sarah."

“Well, it’s true. They’re used to the cold and the wet.” Sarah wrinkled her nose. “I’m not.”

Henry surveyed Caroline, who was watching the storm nervously. She had to be wondering if it was safe for them to go out in. He remembered how bad the storms got in this part of the country, and even though Caroline didn’t live too far away, she would have at least three quagmires she could get stuck in. It would get too dangerous, and Henry wasn’t about to send her home in this weather.

“Well, from the look of it, you two are not going home today.”

“What?” Caroline’s eyes went round, her mouth falling open. “Did you just say that we’re going to stay here tonight?”

“What other option do you have? Unless you want to go out in that rain, and from what I can see, it’s getting worse as we speak.”

Henry jumped when there was another loud clap of thunder and lightning flashes lit up the room. Sarah whimpered.

“Oh, God, I hate storms.” She huddled in her chair. “I’m really glad I’m not a sailor.”

“This is nothing compared to sea storms, but I remember how bad they can get here. And I don’t want to send you two home in this.”

“We could wait it out,” Caroline suggested. “As soon as it eases off, we can go home.”

Henry frowned.

“But the roads will still be terrible. And this could go on for hours. Like I said, the best thing to do is for both of you to stay here for the night. We’ve got plenty of guest rooms.”

Caroline’s mouth opened and closed. She looked like she was floundering. Sarah looked just as dubious.

“Are you sure about that, Henry? It’s not really proper ...”

“Never mind that right now, Sarah. I’d be a terrible gentleman if I sent you out in that. I can get the housekeeper to set up adjoining guest rooms, and you can stay here out of the cold and the wet.”

“You think this storm is going to be here for a while.”

“From the look of it, yes.”

Henry hadn’t planned for a storm, although he had seen it coming since earlier in the day. He didn’t want to think about Caroline getting stuck on the road and getting pneumonia after being out in the rain. She couldn’t go by carriage, and it was too far to walk without the same outcome. Staying was the best option, and all of them knew it.

"I'm not sure if I like this," Caroline murmured, staring at her hands on the table. "This ... I feel like we're trapped."

"You are, just not in the way you think. And it's an unfortunate situation." Henry got to his feet and went to the bell-pull by the fireplace. He tugged on it twice. "Mrs Hadleigh will get two of the rooms set up, and you'll be able to get some sleep. It's going to be just the three of us in the morning, so you don't need to worry about other people joining us."

"What about James?" Sarah asked with a frown. "What if he comes back?"

"Do you think he's going to come back in this weather?"

Sarah fell silent. That was a slight advantage of the storm if James was thinking of returning home; if Caroline and Sarah were stuck in the house and couldn't get out, James couldn't get in, either. They would be safe from him and his drunken outbursts for now. Henry had no idea how long that would happen, but he would take what he could.

Selfish, yes. But Henry had spent most of his life giving to other people. Now it was time for him to be selfish for himself. Even if he was being a gentleman when he didn't want to be.

Tonight was going to be very difficult for him, knowing the woman he wanted was a few rooms away, and he couldn't touch her.

Now Henry was partly beginning to regret saying they could stay the night.

#

Caroline had been fascinated with the house. It was a beautiful building, built with one of the best Georgian architects in charge. Henry had told her that there had been a lot of arguments with his grandfather about what should and shouldn't be in the house. Apparently, his grandfather had some very unique hobbies, and he was fascinated with anything oriental. The architect had needed to tell him that half of what he wanted couldn't be possible.

In exchange for not giving the old duke what he wanted, the house had to be the grandest in the area. And it was. Caroline had to admit that it was better than her own home, a place she loved.

What had put her out a little were the portraits. They were of the current family and many generations before, all lining the wall. There were portraits of all the previous dukes on one wall before entering the dining room, spanning back to the thirteenth century. Caroline had noticed that while the portrait for the next duke wasn't up yet, the inscription was already placed on the wall.

Lieutenant James Beaufort.

It looked like Henry had been disinherited already. Did Henry know? He had to, seeing as he walked past it all the time. But he didn't say anything about it. Either he was ignoring it, or he was used to the fact he was being cast aside.

Caroline's heart went out to him. There was nothing to say that Henry even lived there. Even the family portrait in the library while they had taken the tour didn't include him. Henry had said he was at sea when it had been commissioned, hence his lack of presence, but Caroline had a feeling there was more behind it.

It made her feel bad that she had felt the same way as everyone else. That Henry Beaufort was a cruel, horrible person who always caused havoc. That was far from the truth. He was one of the kindest people she had ever met. There was no arrogance about his efforts at sea, although he did talk about his time when he was on his ship. Caroline had heard the love in his voice when he told them stories of what he got up to. Something that was meant to punish him had actually made him thrive.

It was a shame that the only love and recognition he got were from those he had been passed onto like he was nothing. His parents had no idea what a good man their eldest son was.

Henry led them upstairs, Caroline behind him with Sarah bringing up the rear. She tried not to stare at the way Henry's legs flexed as he climbed, the way his rear moved. Her cheeks burning, Caroline looked away. She should watch where she was looking. Not a good idea to be staring at an intimate part of his body.

But, she had to admit, he did have a nice rear.

There was a loud clap of thunder, and there was a flash. Caroline squealed and tripped on the stairs, only to be caught by Henry before she smashed her nose into the carpet.

“Careful there, My Lady.” He gave her a slight grin. “You’re not scared of a little thunder, are you?”

“I wouldn’t say scared.” Caroline managed to find her feet. “But they do make me a little nervous. Especially when it’s that loud.”

“Don’t worry. You’re safe in here.” Henry brushed her hair out of her eyes, his touch featherlight. “Nothing’s going to hurt you while you’re here with me. I promise.”

That sounded a little too much to say, maybe a little overboard, but Caroline believed him. She tried not to lean into his hand, aware that she was swaying on the stairs. Something flickered behind Henry’s eyes, and then he dropped his hand and turned away.

“Come on. I think the maids have already set up the rooms for you.”

“I ... all right.”

Caroline watched Henry walk away. Her legs felt weak, and she couldn’t bring herself to move. There was a pointed cough behind her, and Caroline turned to see Sarah giving her a pointed look, a sly smile curving at her mouth.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing.” Sarah raised her eyebrows. “Are you going to head up to the next floor, or are you going to stay on the stairs all night?”

Caroline scowled and managed to get her feet to move, heading up onto the next floor and catching up with Henry. As they entered the guest quarters, she began to feel nervous again, but it was nothing to do with the storm.

She was going to be spending the night in the same house as Henry. Granted, they were more than likely at the opposite ends of the house, but she was still only a few rooms away. The thought of being so close to Henry was making her palms sweaty.

What was going on with her? It was like her mind was going to a space that was almost forbidden. But who else wouldn't be thinking such thoughts when they would be in the same building as someone they desired.

You desire him? You're admitting that now?

I am. And I do desire him.

And it was leaving her with heart palpitations.

Henry reached the end of a corridor just as a maid was coming out of a room. She stopped and curtsied at him.

"Lord Bannock."

“Are the rooms ready for our guests, Mabel?”

“Yes, My Lord. Just finishing in the other room.”

Henry nodded.

“Thank you. I know it was short notice. Five minutes is not usually enough time.”

Mabel’s mouth twitched.

“We like to think we’re efficient, My Lord. Is that all for tonight?”

“Yes, it will be. Thank you.”

Mabel bobbed a curtsy at Caroline and Sarah before bowing her head and hurrying away. Henry opened the door and gestured inside.

“This will be your room, Caroline. If you want to wait here for a moment, Sarah, and the maids will let you know when your room is ready.”

“All right.” Sarah didn’t bother to hide her yawn. “I would like to get some sleep. I really don’t fancy going home in this weather.”

“I don’t think anyone can travel in this. Hopefully, it won’t last too long.” Henry didn’t take his eyes off Caroline. “With any luck, you’ll be away in the morning and home safely.”

Caroline believed that. But she felt far from safe right now. Biting her lip, she tried to think of something that she should say.

“Don’t worry about nightclothes,” Henry said quietly. “I’m sure my housekeeper has found some old nightdresses that were in the laundry room. You won’t have to sleep in what you’re wearing.”

“What? Oh, right.” Caroline glanced at Sarah, who was watching her with that sly smile again. “I just feel a little ... well, what are our parents going to say?”

“Your father will appreciate that I looked after your welfare.”

“And your parents?”

“You let me worry about them.” Henry pushed away from the doorframe. “I’ll leave you to it. You two must be exhausted.”

He took Caroline’s hand, and Caroline had to swallow back a gasp as the heat travelled up her arm. She couldn’t look away as Henry bowed, pressing a kiss to her gloved hand. She really wished that he could kiss her bare skin.

She needed to stop her straying thoughts, or she was going to find herself embarrassed.

“Goodnight, Lady Caroline. Lady Sarah.”

“Henry.” Sarah kissed Henry’s cheek. “Thank you again for this. We do appreciate it.”

Henry seemed to acknowledge her words, but he didn’t stop looking at Caroline. Then he let go of her hand and walked away. Caroline watched him as he disappeared down the hall, and Sarah yawned again.

“I think I’m going to fall asleep as soon as my head touches the pillow. It’s a pity that my room isn’t ready yet.”

“Why don’t you take mine? I can take your room.”

The words were out before Caroline could stop them. Sarah frowned.

“Are you sure about that? What are you going to do in the meantime?”

Caroline didn’t answer. She wasn’t sure what she would do, but she found that she didn’t want to go to her room yet. Sarah’s eyebrows practically rose to her hairline.

“Are you really sure about this, Caroline?”

“What do you think I’m planning?”

“It involves a certain Lord Bannock, that much I’m sure about.” Sarah folded her arms. “I’m not going to stop you from anything, but please be aware that even servants talk. Don’t let yourself get caught. That you really won’t be able to explain to your parents.”

Caroline squeezed her friend’s hand.

“You’re a really good friend, Sarah. And I hope you can forgive me in time for the things I said about Lord Bannock. He’s really not what I thought at all.”

“I could tell that from the way you were during dinner. It was like you hung on to his every word.” Sarah peered at her. “Whatever you’re going to do, don’t take too long. And don’t mess Henry around. He doesn’t deserve that.”

Caroline managed a smile.

“I don’t do that to him. I’ll be back shortly.”

She didn’t know what she was doing as she hurried away, but all Caroline knew was that she didn’t want to part from Henry just yet.

She wanted to be in his company for just a little longer.

At this point, if something happened, she wouldn't really care.

She headed back to the stairs, surprised that she found them in such a maze of a house. Henry was at the far end of the hallway, just reaching the top of the stairs. Caroline swallowed and took off her gloves, tucking them into the belt around her waist. Then she hurried after him.

“Henry?”

Chapter 18

Henry froze when he heard Caroline. She was following him? His heart racing, he turned and saw her coming towards him. What was she doing? She should be going into her room and staying there for the night.

It was the safest option, in a room as far away from him as possible. If she were too close, the temptation would have been too great. Even now, Henry was still shaking from touching Caroline and unable to do anything about it.

He needed to get to his bedchamber and be alone for a while.

If only Caroline would walk away. She should, and he should be telling her to leave.

But he couldn't.

"Caroline?" he croaked, clearing his throat as Caroline drew closer. "Is something wrong? Is your bedchamber not to your liking?"

"It's nothing like that."

She stopped in front of him. They were at the top of the stairs, where the servants passing below could see them. Henry was sure they would get several ideas if they saw him and Caroline together, even

when they weren't touching. Caroline didn't need that.

But he needed her. Badly.

"I ... " Caroline bit her lip, brushing her hair out of her eyes. "I wanted to say thank you. For being a good host. For your kindness. For ... for being a good man."

Henry frowned.

"You've already thanked me with your presence tonight. You don't need to thank me further."

"I know, but I ... I feel like I should."

Had she moved closer? Henry hadn't realised until Caroline reached up and brushed her fingers across his cheek. Her bare fingers. Henry gripped her wrist.

"You're not wearing your gloves."

Caroline smiled.

"I'm not."

Henry glanced into the foyer below. He could see a footman crossing the room towards the drawing room. Servants were going about their business until nearly midnight in this house. Especially downstairs.

But the sleeping quarters, where he was, they were absent tonight. Seeing as it was only him sleeping there ...

Grabbing Caroline's hand, he tugged her out of sight of the entrance hall, moving her down the darkened hallway. She followed him, not saying a word as she matched his pace.

It didn't take long to reach his bedchamber, and Henry got Caroline inside, looking around to make sure none of the servants had traipsed into this part of the house. His valet would have gone to bed long ago, choosing not to help with undressing him at night.

Hopefully, they wouldn't be disturbed.

What are you doing? You can't deflower her! She's too special for that.

I'm not going that far. But I can give her something.

"Henry?" Caroline stood in the middle of his room as Henry locked the door. "What are we doing?"

"There is one way you can thank me." Henry stayed by the door, feeling his heart racing so fast he felt dizzy. "Don't be concerned about

your innocence. I'm not going to take that. I'm not a monster."

"I didn't think you would." The look Caroline gave him was far too trusting. "I know you would never do that to me."

That felt humbling. Even so, Henry came towards her.

"Are you sure about that?" he whispered. "How do you know I'm not cornering you for something nefarious?"

"Because you would have done it already. Besides," Caroline stepped towards him and reached for him, "I was hoping you'd take me somewhere private so I could do this."

Her kiss was so sweet that Henry almost lost control of his restraint. Growling, he hauled her against him, his hands touching whatever he could reach. Caroline didn't push him away. She clung onto him, her hands tightening around his head as she pressed her hips against his.

Against his erection.

Henry moaned. She had to know how aroused he was for her, that being alone with her was conjuring up all sorts of thoughts in his head. It was all he could do not to throw her on the bed and sink into her body. But this was Caroline, the woman he had loved for a long time. She deserved better.

Maybe she deserves better than me.

That had Henry pausing. Where had that come from? Caroline broke the kiss and drew back.

“Henry? What is it?”

“What? Oh.” Henry eased her back slowly. “I guess pulling you into my bedchamber was a test of my restraints. And I’m losing.”

“I’m the one who came after you. I kissed you.”

“I know you did. But I still have to remember where we are and what we are to each other.” Henry brushed a strand of hair from her face and tucked it behind her ear. He tried not to stare at the scar that James had given her. “I desire you so much, Caroline. Being in your presence and knowing you hated me was tough enough, but being with you and knowing you desire me ... it’s a little humbling.”

“Humbling?” Caroline frowned. “Why is it humbling?”

“I ... I don’t know.” Henry swallowed and stepped back. “I don’t know what I’m saying anymore. Things are a mess in my head.”

“I’ve done this?”

Caroline looked uncertain now. Henry gazed at the floor.

“Only a short while ago, you said you would have nothing to do with me. That you would always see me as the one who hurt you. Having you here, in my arms and showing how much ...” Henry ran his hands through his hair. “I guess I’m a little shaken by what we’re doing. I never thought it would happen and ... well ...”

“You think I might suddenly turn around and say I hate you again.”

Henry wished that she didn’t understand him so well. He flinched and didn’t look up, refusing to when he heard a rustling of skirts, and then those skirts and Caroline’s feet appeared before him. Caroline cupped his jaw in her hand.

“Henry, look at me. Please.”

How could he deny that? Henry looked up, and Caroline smiled at him, stroking his jaw.

“What happened in the past is staying there. I hope you can forgive me for thinking that way. But that is not me now.”

“I forgave you a long time ago, Caroline.” Henry captured her hand and kissed her palm. “I forgave you for believing the general consensus before we met again.”

“Why would you do that?”

Should he tell her? Henry knew he was stepping into dangerous territory. Maybe he should send her back to her room. He moved away and went towards the door.

“I think you’d better go back to your room before someone notices that you’ve gone.”

“Not until you tell me why you forgave me?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Henry didn’t turn around. “I’m sure I’ve said it before.”

“I want to hear it now. Why?”

He should be telling her to go. His head was not in the right state for this. Henry felt far too vulnerable. But instead of unlocking the door and sending her out, Henry turned to her. Caroline was watching him with her hands on her hips; her chin lifted as she stood tall. She wasn’t going anywhere.

Sighing, he leaned on the door.

“You know it only took a couple of meetings to hate me, right? For me, it was the opposite. We only met those times, but all I could think about was you and that bright smile of yours, the sparkle in your eyes. That fire when you screamed at me, believing I had shot at you. I was only sixteen, but I knew that you were special.” Grimacing, he rubbed the back of his neck. Now he felt about two inches tall. “True, there

were other women while I was at sea. I wasn't a monk, but I could never bring myself to feel anything beyond lust. Every time I tried, I found myself thinking about you. I compared every woman I met to you. Even if you hated me for the rest of my life, I knew I would love you. It ... it felt like a punishment. I'm seen as the bad son, the scapegoat, and I'm practically disinherited for something I haven't done. I might as well fall in love with someone who would never love me back."

Caroline was silent, and Henry glanced up. She was staring at him with her mouth open. Henry groaned and turned away, unlocking the door. He couldn't look at her now. Not after what he just confessed.

"I think you'd better go, Caroline. We're both going to get into trouble, and I don't want you to be forced into anything if there has to be a marriage out of this interlude."

"I don't care."

Henry froze.

"What did you say?"

"I don't care if we get caught. Marriage to you won't be so bad." She touched his back, her fingers warm through his jacket. "I'm sure I'll be able to make the most of being a sailor's wife."

Henry groaned.

“Don’t say things like that, Caroline.”

“Why not?”

Henry reached behind him and grabbed her wrist, tugging her past him and pressing her against the door. Caroline squeaked, her eyes widening as Henry crowded her, her eyes so dark they were almost black. Henry buried his hands in her hair, not caring if the pins stuck into his fingers.

“Because you make me want to take when it’s not permissible for me.”

“Then take.” Caroline ran her hands over his chest. “I’ll give whatever you want to take.”

“You’d better not say that, or I’ll be taking more than you want to give.”

“How do you know?”

The urge to take her to bed was growing again, and it was stronger than before. Henry’s chest tightened. He wanted her badly. Her desire for him was making him want to break the rules.

But that was not how he wanted to be. He was not James, who would seduce and take to bed any woman who looked at him in a way he liked. He had put several women in the position of being ruined, and

Henry would not do that to Caroline. She was special.

To him, she was incredibly precious.

Even as he told himself to let her go, he kissed her. Slowly, deeply, taking his time. Caroline whimpered and tried to kiss him harder, but Henry pressed her against the door and kept it at his pace. He wanted to savour her for now, taking his fill. A kiss wasn't enough to sate his appetite for her, but it would do.

He would take all the kisses he could get.

"Henry ..." Caroline's head tilted back, and Henry kissed down her throat, hearing her moan as he reached the point where her neck met her shoulders. "Please, Henry ..."

"What do you want?"

"I ... I don't know." There was a hesitation in her voice. "I know I want something, but ... I don't know how to explain it."

"See if you can." Henry rested his hand on her hip. "Does that feel nice?"

"Yes." Caroline sighed as his hand trailed up her side. "So does that."

Henry kept kissing her neck as he closed his hand over her breast. Caroline's breath hitched, and she pressed into his hand.

"And that?"

"That feels good." Caroline grabbed his head up. "You're making me want things I shouldn't be asking."

This time, Henry let Caroline take charge, her kiss fierce as she pressed her hand over his, urging him to squeeze her breast. He pressed his erection against her, using his other hand to cup her hip and urge her closer to him. Caroline gasped, her kiss becoming fiercer. She kissed him like she needed air.

He needed to make her leave before he really did ruin her. Henry wouldn't do that to her, not as an unmarried woman.

Just a little longer. One more kiss.

It took all of Henry's self-restraint to break the kiss, his hands easing their grip around her. He pressed his hands to the door and kept the distance between them, breathing heavily as he tried to get his heart to stop racing.

"You really need to go, Caroline. We can only play with fire for so long before it gets out of control, and I have too much respect for you to do that."

Caroline was also panting, her chest heaving and her cheeks a dark pink. With her bright eyes and swollen lips, there would be no doubt as to what she had been doing. She reached for him, but Henry shook his head.

“Caroline. You need to leave.”

“I ... all right.” Caroline swallowed. “Will I see you tomorrow?”

“I live here, don’t I? Of course.” Henry managed a smile as he glanced up at her. “We’ll see each other tomorrow.”

“I hope so.” Caroline straightened, smoothing down her dress. “Goodnight, Lord Bannock.”

“Goodnight, My Lady.”

Henry moved so Caroline could open the door. She was in the doorway when she stopped and turned back. Then she stepped towards him and rose on tiptoe to kiss him. Henry returned the kiss, but he didn’t reach for her. His self-control was hanging on by a thread, as it was. Caroline broke the kiss and gave him a small smile.

“Sweet dreams, Henry,” she whispered.

Then she turned and left the room, closing the door behind her. And Henry felt like all the air had gone out of his body.

#

“Caroline?”

Caroline turned. Sarah was coming into the library, wearing a nightgown with her hair down and carrying a candlestick. The nightgown was a little big on her.

“Sarah. I thought you would be asleep as well.”

“I was getting into bed when I realised I hadn’t heard you come back.” Sarah crossed the room, the light from her candle flickering across her face. “What are you doing down here?”

Caroline sighed.

“I had a feeling I wasn’t going to sleep very well, so I thought I’d come and see if Henry’s family had any interesting books to read.” She ran her fingers along the spines of the books. “Everything is a first edition. It must have cost a fortune to get all these.”

“They do have a dukedom,” Sarah pointed out. “They can afford anything.”

“I suppose.” Caroline selected a book and opened it. “This will do. I need something to distract myself.”

“Did something happen?” Sarah rolled her eyes. “I don’t know why I asked that. Of course something happened. Even I can’t expect you and Henry to sit in a room alone and discuss the weather.”

Caroline could feel her face getting warm. She absently turned the pages of the book.

“Things are changing, Sarah. And it ... it’s getting stronger.”

“What do you mean?”

“Henry and I ... things are ... well ...” Caroline huffed and shut the book with a snap. “I don’t know what to say about it.”

Sarah sighed and put the candlestick onto a nearby table.

“I know what you’re trying to say. You two are madly in love, and keeping your hands off him is getting very difficult.”

“Madly in love?” Caroline frowned. “I wouldn’t call it that.”

“What would you call it? I saw the way you two looked at each other during dinner, and I felt like an interloper.” Sarah brushed her hair out of her face. “I know Henry’s been in love with you for years, and you seem to be falling fast yourself. Maybe you had something for him

before, and you refused to believe it.”

Caroline didn't know. She knew she had intense feelings for Henry since the beginning, but those had been of hatred, surely? How could she be in love with someone she believed had hurt her? That didn't make any sense.

It was all very strange, and Caroline wasn't sure how to untangle it.

“You said to me before that Henry spoke of having his heart for someone while he was at sea. That he wouldn't say who it was, but that he would always have her in his thoughts.” She peered at her friend. “He was talking about me, wasn't he?”

“He was. I didn't really figure it out until I saw how he was looking at you at that ball where you met again. And I also saw the pain.” Sarah shook her head. “He wanted you, but he knew he couldn't have you. Being around you had to be painful, and hearing you speak about him as you did was painful for me.”

Caroline winced.

“I went really into it, didn't I?”

“You did. But what's changed your feelings towards him? I've seen them shift over the previous weeks, but I wasn't sure what started the change.”

Caroline wasn't sure about that herself. She went to the settee by the roaring fire and sat down, staring at her hands in her lap.

"I suppose it started when I fell during that ride we went on with James. Henry was there taking charge. He was ... he was a gentleman, and he had a really soft touch. He never did anything that would have been what I expected of him. The way he treated my leg and kept my modesty when I thought he would be like James ... I think that's when I began to wonder if he was really what I had been told. That maybe I had been misled."

Sarah didn't say anything for a moment. Then there was a rustling of fabric, and she knelt before her friend, laying her hand over Caroline's.

"You were led by the masses. They had an opinion of him that the public knew about, drawn up by his parents. They had made him a pariah before he ever got the chance because, in their heads, they already had a favourite child. Even if Henry didn't try to protect James in the beginning, he would still have been treated as a scapegoat."

"How do you know?"

"It's a gut feeling. Henry was going to struggle either way. James can do no wrong. He can do whatever he wants, and it's passed off as boys being boys. Henry has tighter restrictions because they already had an opinion of him. They didn't give him a chance."

"Just like I didn't give him a chance," Caroline murmured.

Sarah squeezed her hand.

“You’re giving him a chance now, aren’t you? You’re seeing a side of him that you didn’t think was there. And from the way you are around him, you like what you see.”

“I ... I guess.”

“So, is that a bad thing? Do you not want to have feelings for him?”

Caroline didn’t know how to answer that question. She knew that what she was feeling for Henry was intense, and she didn’t want it to end. But after hating him for so long, it felt like she was a fickle woman who could be easily turned.

But Henry hadn’t done anything to turn me. He was always just himself. I was looking at him the same way everyone else did.

And he suffered for it.

“You do love him, don’t you?” Sarah asked quietly.

Caroline bit her lip.

“I don’t know. I do feel something, and it’s strong. And I do know that

I want to hold onto Henry.”

“You don’t want to let him go, do you?”

“Does that sound awful of me? I shouldn’t be so strong in something.”

Sarah’s expression softened.

“Oh, Caroline, there is nothing wrong with going from hating someone to loving them. People’s feelings change, and it’s a natural thing. No one is going to be surprised if you and Henry get married. These things happen all the time.”

“Married?” Caroline blinked. “We haven’t even had our courtship yet. How can you be thinking about marriage now?”

“From the way you two are around each other, I don’t see you courting for very long, if at all. Providing you two didn’t get up to anything in his bedchamber ...”

“We didn’t ... well ...” Caroline blushed. “We didn’t do what you’re suggesting.”

“But you wanted to, didn’t you?”

“Sarah! Don’t talk like that!”

Sarah's eyes twinkled as she stood up.

"Things are going to be fine. You can be confident about that. But do not be surprised if Henry offers you marriage without courtship. Considering he'll be going to sea in a few short weeks, I can't see him wanting to hang around and let you wait for years until he gets back."

Until he gets back. Caroline had almost forgotten that he was a sailor. He might be a member of the nobility, but he was still a seaman at heart. That was where his love really lay. Could Caroline compete with that and stay at home, wondering if he would fall at sea and be lost forever?

Could she cope with knowing that he might not come home?

She was jerked out of her thoughts when there was a loud bang outside. She squeaked and jumped to her feet.

"Dear God, what was that?"

"It's probably just the thunder." Sarah shrugged and started to warm her hands in the heat of the fire. "Nothing to worry about."

"But that didn't sound like thunder."

It sounded like someone was throwing something against the wall. Something very heavy. Caroline went to the window and peered out. The rain was still coming down, pounding against the window to the point she couldn't see out. Everything was just black with the occasional flash of distant lightning.

"I can't see anything."

"It was probably something outside getting knocked over. That can happen in storms." Sarah twisted her hair and tugged it over one shoulder. "I wouldn't be surprised if we went outside now and found a tree had fallen over or the roof had come off the stables. Something like that."

Caroline didn't think so. Something was not right. That didn't sound like a tree falling down and, even over the sound of the rain, she couldn't hear the horses panicking. She leaned in towards the window, trying to see out. Maybe someone was outside and trying to get in. A servant, perhaps? A tenant?

But what would any of them be doing out at this time of night in this weather?

Suddenly, a face appeared in front of her, almost pressing its nose against the glass. It looked like a blurry mess, the rain distorting the features.

Caroline screamed and jerked back, tripping over her feet. She sprawled on the floor, trying to back away from the face as it stared in, its eyes following her every move. With the distortion, it looked like it was giving her an ugly sneer.

“Caroline!” Sarah was at her side. “What on earth?”

“There’s someone out there.” Caroline’s heart was racing. “There’s someone outside. I think they’re trying to get in!”

“You what?”

“Can’t you see it?” Caroline pointed. “There!”

Sarah looked, and her expression turned confused.

“I don’t see anything.”

“What?”

Caroline looked closer. There was another flash of light, and then she saw there was nothing there. The face had gone. Her stomach lurched as she slumped, burying her head in her hands.

“But it was there. I saw it. Someone was outside.”

“Did you recognise them?”

“No, I didn’t. There was too much rain.” Caroline tried to take deep breaths, but it was hurting her chest. “God, that was frightening.”

Sarah rubbed her back.

“I think the storm’s getting to you. Your emotions are all over the place.”

“I didn’t imagine it, Sarah! There was someone outside in the garden.”

Maybe she was starting to get paranoid. Everything was in a mess in her head, and it had to be making her see things. That had to be it. Caroline scrambled to her feet.

“I ... I think we’d better retire for the night.”

“What about your book?”

“Hmm? Oh.” Caroline saw the book she had left on the settee. She hurried over and picked it up, holding it against her chest. “I’m sure it will distract me. I don’t want to have nightmares today.”

Sarah gave her a smile.

“That is the best option. I know you’re not too keen on storms ...”

“I don’t mind thunder, but the rain that comes with it and having it overhead ...” Caroline shuddered. “Not really my thing.”

“Understandable. It’s getting a bit wild out there.” Sarah took her arm. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Your candle?”

“Oh, that.”

Sarah hurried to where she had left her candlestick and picked it up. At that moment, the library doors to the terrace burst open with another clap of thunder, and a dark shape filled the doorway. Sarah screamed while Caroline’s heart stopped. She hadn’t imagined it. There had been someone outside.

Sarah bolted, dropping the candlestick and grabbing Caroline’s hand.

“Let’s get out of here! Come on!”

Caroline stumbled behind her friend as they ran into the hall and headed towards the stairs. She heard a growl behind her, which just made her run faster.

They skidded around the sharp bend, Sarah grabbing the stair banister

and running up the stairs. Caroline tried to do the same, but her hand missed, and she hit the floor hard. Pain shot up through her elbow, and Caroline curled into a ball, squeezing her eyes shut at the pain.

“Caroline!”

There was the sound of running feet, and then someone was kneeling beside her. Caroline was rolled onto her back, and then she saw Henry leaning over her.

“Henry?”

“Good God, Caroline, what on earth are you doing?” Henry’s eyes searched her face, and he brushed her hair from her eyes. “Was that you I heard screaming just now?”

“It ... it was both of us.” Caroline swallowed. “Where’s Sarah?”

“I’m here.”

Caroline managed to sit up and saw Sarah clutching onto the banister with white knuckles. Henry helped Caroline to her feet.

“Now are you going to tell me what happened just now and why you’re running away like the Devil himself is after you?”

“There ... there was someone outside.” Caroline leaned into him, feeling the steady beat of his heart against her cheek. “I was getting a book, and there was someone outside. Then the doors opened, and he came in.”

“Who did?”

“We don’t know.” Sarah pointed a shaking finger. “They’re in the library. We didn’t know what to do.”

Then she started to cry again, which set Caroline off. She couldn’t help it; everything just vanished, and there was nothing left.

Chapter 19

When Henry had heard the screams, he thought that someone was being attacked. Still dressed in his shirt and breeches, he had shoved his feet into his shoes and ran towards Sarah and Caroline's rooms. Had someone come into their bedchambers while they slept?

He was at Caroline's door when he heard more screaming. It wasn't coming from their rooms. It was downstairs. What was going on?

His heart had missed a beat when he saw Caroline try to grab onto the banister as she slid, only to fall hard onto the tiles. She was still shaking in his arms as she sobbed.

Someone was in the house, come in without permission, and had terrified his woman. Henry eased Caroline off him.

"You wait here. I'll go and see what's happening."

"What? No!" Caroline clutched at his arm. "You can't go!"

"Why not? I have to see what's happening. This is my house, after all."

"But ..."

Caroline was cut off by the arrival of two of the footmen, both in their shirtsleeves. They looked like they had been down in the coal cellar with smudges of dark coal on their clothes and faces. They both looked out of breath.

Henry frowned.

“Klaus, Creek? What’s going on?”

“It’s ... it’s your brother, My Lord,” Klaus wheezed, trying to bow but ended up propping himself up on his knees. “He’s in the library.”

James was here? Henry felt Caroline stiffen beside him.

“I thought he was going to be in town tonight.”

“So did I.” His brother had to be mad to be travelling in this weather. “What’s he doing now?”

“He ...” Creek gulped in air, his cheeks red. “He was stamping out a candle when we went in. The rug was a little scorched. Then he demanded that we get him a drink and collapsed onto the settee. We ... we didn’t know what to do.”

It sounded like his brother was drunk. What was he doing back here at this time of night? Henry turned to Sarah.

“Sarah, take Caroline upstairs and go to your rooms. I’ll deal with James.”

“You’re going to deal with him alone?” Sarah stared. “Wouldn’t it be best to leave him?”

“Just take Caroline with you, Sarah, and stop arguing.” Henry cupped Caroline’s jaw in his hand. “It’ll be fine. I’ve just got to deal with my brother.”

Caroline bit her lip.

“I’m not sure if you should. He could be volatile.”

“And he’s soaking wet and possibly blackout drunk. He needs to be dealt with before he catches a chill.”

Caroline frowned.

“I don’t know why you’re so generous towards him after what he’s done.”

“That’s because I’m not heartless.” Henry kissed her forehead. “Off you go. Creek, you come with me, and Klaus, make sure Lord Beaufort’s room is ready.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

Klaus hurried off, and Henry followed Creek towards the library. He could hear the loud, out-of-tune singing, which had him groaning. James was going to be in an argumentative state. When he was singing, he was often looking for someone to fight with.

Not exactly how he wanted to finish the evening.

Creek went into the library first, moving off to the side as Henry came in. He saw James sitting on the settee, singing as he turned the pages in a large book. He looked like he had been dragged through a river. His clothes were soaking wet and dripping onto the fabric of the settee.

A puddle was forming around his feet on the rug. His hair was plastered to his head, his face stark white. There was a slight greenish hue to his skin, though. Henry was not surprised that Caroline and Sarah had been scared when they saw him looking through the window; he was enough to frighten anyone.

He was supposed to be in town, gambling away his wages. Henry had even made sure that James would have somewhere to spend the night, just in case he chose to come back and bother them while he was at dinner with Caroline. The last thing he wanted was his brother to come in and ruin the evening. Caroline might not care for him, but his presence would be bad and cut everything short.

James still saw getting Caroline's attention as a competition. Even though Henry knew his brother could never win, he was still determined to take Caroline away.

He's not going anywhere near Caroline tonight. Not if I can help it.

“Boring,” James grunted, shutting the book with a snap. “Boring, boring, boring. I don’t know why Father bothers with these things.”

He tossed it away, the book bouncing on the hearth and stopping dangerously close to the fire. Henry hurried over and snatched it up, flinching as he caught his knuckles on the red-hot grate.

“You can’t treat books like that, James!” He carried the book to a table and put it down, checking it for fire marks. “Father will go mad if he discovers part of his collection has ended up going into the fire.”

James grunted.

“It’s not like he’s going to blame me. It’s always you.”

Henry knew that. And he didn’t want to go through that again. He sucked his fingers. The pain was excruciating, and it was making him feel like he had been stung.

“What are you doing here, James? This is a dangerous night to come here. You could have come to harm out there.”

“I almost did. I fell into a river that wasn’t meant to be there, cutting

across the fields. Nearly drowned when I got wedged between a couple of rocks.” James shivered and shook his hair, water going everywhere. “I was thinking of having a bath, but I’m not sure about that after being immersed in water.”

“Why were you coming back in the first place? You had a chance to spend the night playing cards and getting drunk. I would have thought that was a perfect opportunity for you.”

“I got bored with all that. Everyone was cheating.” James scowled. “I hate cheating.”

“You mean people caught you cheating and threw you out when you wouldn’t stop.”

“I don’t cheat!”

Henry snorted.

“You’ve been cheating all your life, James. Why stop now?”

James pouted.

“You shouldn’t be so mean to me. I’m the one who got stuck in the rain. I had to turn the carriage back and come on my own when I wasn’t able to get along the road.”

“That was your own fault. You saw how bad it was, and you should have stayed in town, not come here.”

“So you could try and seduce a couple of ladies without me getting involved?”

Henry folded his arms.

“I was having dinner with Lady Sarah and Lady Caroline. When the storm came in, they weren’t able to leave, so I offered them the guest rooms.”

“I see.” James sneered. “And it wasn’t for anything else? Like thinking of ways to get Lady Caroline into your bed?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, James. I’m not going to do that to a respectable lady.”

James snorted.

“I wouldn’t put it past you. I mean, you got me out of the house to make sure you had a clear path to her, didn’t you? The majority of the people I was playing cards with were your friends. More loyal to you than me. And I’m pretty sure you’re the one who got me set up at that small hotel.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You were scared that I would be able to come in and get the woman you want. You wanted to cheat me.”

Henry sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I never tried to cheat you out of anything. I never agreed to compete for Caroline’s hand.”

“Only because you knew she would never look at you.” James got to his feet and looked Henry up and down with distaste. “Looks like she’s looking at you now. You think you’re going to have her as your wife? I don’t think she’ll be able to cope being a sailor’s wife, especially when you’re not at home and there are more temptations closer to home.”

“You think she could cope being the wife of a soldier who deserts at the first sign of danger?” Henry shot back.

James flinched.

“I did what I thought was best at the time.”

“You’re being searched for by the Cavalry Staff Corps! They’re planning on taking you back to be tried for desertion. You could be hanged for that, you know!”

“They’re not going to do that. Not the son of a duke.” James sniffed. “Father wouldn’t let them.”

“It’s not a question about letting them. You’ve done it twice, and they’re not going to give you a pardon because of who you are. You know that well, James. If you’re incredibly lucky, you’ll be kicked out of the army and told to leave the country to serve in exile, but I doubt that’s going to happen.”

Henry had met some members of the Cavalry Staff Corps, tasked with the crime and punishment in the British Army. He did not care for them at all, seeing them as cruel people who took minor charges and twisted them until there was no choice but to execute the accused. His fellow sailors hadn’t had much to say about them that was pleasant, either.

While James did need punishment for his actions, sentencing to death wasn’t the way to go about it. Henry didn’t want that for his brother, no matter his own feelings on the matter.

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“I still don’t see it happening.” James wobbled towards the fire, staring into the flames as he leaned on the mantelpiece. “It’ll just be cleared up, just like everything else.”

“You mean Mother and Father will mop up your messes,” Henry snapped. “What do you think they’re going to say when they find out you’ve deserted instead of coming home on leave? You can’t hide that once the Cavalry Staff Corps officers come to take you away.”

“I’ll think of something. I always do.”

“Not this time, James.”

James glanced at him. He was still clearly drunk, but the hatred in his eyes was clear to see. Henry could only hope he could get his brother upstairs and locked in his room. The mess in the library was going to take a while to clear up.

“You are always the high and mighty one, aren’t you, Henry?” James sneered. “It doesn’t matter what I do to take the blame off me; you still manage to be better than me.”

“I don’t ...”

“You were always the clever one, you were better at shooting and riding, and you were the better-looking brother. Even when you were sent away to be put on a ship far away from us, you still managed to turn it around and make it work for you.” His brother pushed off the mantelpiece and advanced on Henry. “It’s all but sorted with making me the new Lord Bannock, and you don’t seem to care. It doesn’t matter what I do to make myself better than you; you’re always able to come out on top.”

Henry frowned.

“How am I supposed to come out on top when I’m always the one put down and scolded? I never did anything, and our parents have never

recognised my achievements, so how am I coming out on top?"

"Because you always do." James' words slurred as he stood before his brother, looking him over with a scowl. "I've always been jealous of you, did you know that? I heard of your escapades at sea, and I really wished that you would fall overboard and never be found again, or you would be killed during a battle. But that never happened. You were given medals and praised to the heavens. Fellow soldiers who met you in ports had nothing but good things to say about you, and soldiers don't often get along with sailors. How was I supposed to get the respect I deserved from the people I fought alongside when you got there first?"

"You can still get that. All you had to do was stay there and fight."

"Fight? That's a laugh! I don't want to be anywhere near a battle, but I can't leave now, can I? Not without a good reason."

"Then why didn't you say before you joined the army that you didn't want to go?" Henry demanded. "Why enlist if you're going to run away?"

James scoffed.

"You have no idea, do you? Our parents were proud of me. They wanted me to do something good for the family name, and they had someone lined up to marry me. But I didn't want to marry her. She was ugly and uninteresting. Who cares if she was rich and could be advantageous?" He staggered away, bumping into a chair. "I joined the army to get out of it. That worked, and my parents got over their annoyance that I ran away, but then I was stuck. Even as an officer, I wasn't going to be at the back and pointing where to go. They

expected me to be there taking the hits like everyone else. Not for me!”

Henry had no idea if it was the alcohol or the truth coming through, but James’ words were chilling. He had known that his brother was selfish and wanted things his own way, but to admit that he had done it all because he was jealous of Henry? That didn’t make any sense.

“You were the one who got Mother and Father’s attention,” he pointed out. “You got everything you wanted, while I was put to one side and had everyone, even the servants, believe I was the bad one of the two. I had very few champions, and you had everyone hanging onto your every word. What part of that was there for you to be jealous of? I don’t understand.”

“Because you were the first son.” James swung around on him. “You didn’t need to do anything to ensure that you got the grander prize once Father passed away. You were always going to be first, even if Father hated you. I would have to play catch up all the time.”

Henry stared.

“Well?” James snapped. “What do you have to say for yourself? Are you going to apologise?”

“For what? What do I have to apologise for?”

“For everything! For being the first born!” James fumbled for something in his pocket. “For being the one Caroline Folton prefers! I thought I could capture her attention, especially when I realised she

was the girl you desired, steal her away from you. And I find her here, late at night, with you. It doesn't take a smart person to know what was going on here."

"Nothing was happening, James. I'm just being a gentleman to a couple of ladies."

"A gentleman? Huh!"

"You really think I'm going to send them out in this weather? I'm not that mad." Henry turned to Creek, who was hovering by the door. "Creek, go and fetch Lipscomb and Thomas. Lord Beaufort is going to need help getting up the stairs."

"You stay where you are, Creek!" James gave up fumbling in his pockets and stormed over to the fireplace. "You're going to be carrying someone out of here, but it won't be me."

Henry stiffened as James withdrew one of the long daggers on display above the fireplace, weighing it in his hand as he turned to Henry. Oh, God. He had not planned on this.

"James, what are you doing?"

"I'm doing what I've wanted to do for years." James took a staggering step towards him, the dagger out, and pointed towards Henry. "It should have been you I shot at years ago, not Caroline Folton. I should have got rid of you when we were children. Then I would be the only son of the Duke of Cornwall, and I wouldn't have to compete with anyone."

Henry moved back as James moved closer, eyeing up the dagger. James was strong, but he could tackle him. The dagger was making him nervous, though. With James wobbling as he was, he was unpredictable. He couldn't seriously be thinking that he could have a fight and kill Henry without repercussions.

James let out a cry and charged towards him. Henry darted to the side and pushed hard, sending James toppling onto the floor. As his brother lay dazed, Henry grabbed the bewildered footman and pushed him out of the room, snagging the key from the lock and slotting it home on the other side. He shut the door with a bang.

"I don't think we should risk taking him upstairs in his current state," he said grimly as he locked the door. "He can sleep it off in there."

"Will he be all right in there, My Lord?" Creek asked nervously.

"He's going to have to be." Henry glanced at the footman. "Have you got any better ideas on how to deal with a drunk man waving a knife around?"

"No, My Lord."

"Then he's staying in there." Henry leaned on the door and closed his eyes. "Make the staff aware that we have a guest in the library. If the maids want to clean up in the morning, they'll have to get the key from me."

“What are we going to say to the duke and duchess when they return tomorrow?”

Henry grunted.

“They’ll probably blame me, anyway. They’ll more than likely say that I got my brother drunk and shoved the dagger in his hand. It’s not the first time they’ve believed something so outlandish.”

Creek brightened.

“I could tell them the truth. Wouldn’t they believe me?”

“That’s generous, Creek, but let me deal with them. It’s best that I do that instead of the servants.”

Henry could feel his head beginning to hurt. This was turning into a bad night now. So much for having a quiet evening with pleasant company. He could imagine what his parents were going to say when they returned. James was more than likely going to make a mess of the library, throwing things around and being sick. And Henry would be the one blamed for locking him in there instead of taking him upstairs and pandering to him.

He pushed off the door and rubbed his temples.

“I’m going to the drawing room for a while. Is there any of that

brandy left?”

“I don’t know, My Lord, but I can find out.”

“Please. I think I’m going to need one.”

“Yes, My Lord.” Creek looked down at himself. “I’ll get myself cleaned up, and then I’ll get the brandy.”

“Don’t worry about what you look like, Creek. At this moment in time, I don’t care. Just get me the brandy.”

Creek bowed and hurried off. He could have been walking around with no clothes on, and Henry wouldn’t have batted an eyelid. Not after what James had just told him.

He was jealous of Henry? That was something he couldn’t get his head around. How could James be jealous of him when James was the one who got practically everything? He didn’t need even to ask; if he simply said he wanted something, it was there the next day. Henry never got that.

How could he be jealous when everything was laid at his feet, and Henry had to fight for what he wanted and then never got? That didn’t make sense.

It had to be the drink talking. James got more and more erratic when he drank, and he could say practically anything. But Henry had seen

the look in his brother's eyes. That wasn't something that could be disguised by the drink. He really hated him.

Even though it shouldn't have been a surprise, it was chilling.

Henry headed down the hall, coming into the foyer as Klaus came down the stairs. He waved to catch the footman's attention.

"Don't bother about the room, Klaus. Lord Beaufort prefers to sleep it off in the library."

"Yes, My Lord. Shall I make sure everyone is aware?"

"If they haven't heard already. I'm surprised if nobody heard the shouting coming from that part of the house."

"Oh, trust me, we heard."

Henry looked up and frowned when he saw Sarah coming down the stairs, watching him with a grumpy scowl.

"What are you doing here? I thought I told you and Caroline to go to your rooms."

Sarah snorted.

“You think we’re going to listen to you when something like that is going on? Caroline said she would wait in the drawing room for you, and I said I’d help Klaus prepare your brother’s room.” She gave the footman a rueful glance. “When I found him, he was making a pig’s ear of the bed. Do male servants not know how to make a bed or turn it down?”

Klaus’ face went red. Henry sighed and rubbed his eyes.

“Well, it’s not going to be needed now. Not with James being so volatile.”

“Volatile?”

“Let’s just say you wouldn’t want to approach him if you don’t want to be gutted.”

Sarah’s eyes widened.

“He’s armed?”

“I wouldn’t say he was dangerous, but I’m not dealing with that tonight.” Henry’s head was really beginning to hurt. “I’ll have a brandy, and then I’m retiring for the night.”

“A brandy sounds like a good idea,” Sarah declared, jumping off the

stairs. "Might get us into a state where we can pass out."

"Brandy isn't quite supposed to do that, Sarah."

"It will with me. I go all funny when I have a brandy." Sarah paused. "Did you hear that?"

Henry listened. He had heard a thumping a moment ago, but he had thought that was the tree on the west side of the house. It did tend to bang against the windows when the wind really got up. His father constantly complained about the tree, but he never cut it down.

Then he heard it again. It was thumping again, but it was a little more rhythmic. And it sounded close. It couldn't be the tree ...

That was when they heard a scream. And Henry's heart stopped.

Caroline.

With Sarah close behind him, Henry ran to the drawing room and burst in. Caroline was backing away from the door that led out into the gardens. The door was warped, someone hitting the door on the other side. The whole frame rattled.

Whoever it was seemed to be throwing their whole weight into it.

“Caroline!”

Caroline let out a sob when she saw him and ran into his arms, hugging him tightly as she whimpered.

“I was just sitting by the fire, and then I heard a noise outside.” She looked up. “Then someone started trying to break the door down. And something came through the door.”

“What?”

Henry squinted. He couldn’t see much across the room, but there was a hole in the actual wood. It looked like someone had tried to stab it.

“Stay with Sarah.” He passed Caroline to his friend. “Klaus, where are you?”

“Right here, My Lord.” The footman appeared at his side. “What are you going to do?”

“We’re going to see who’s outside the door.”

Although Henry had a good idea who it was. He had just remembered that the outside library door was still open. Even though the inner door was locked, James was still able to get out. And it looked like he was trying to find another way in.

“Henry!” Sarah hissed. “You can’t be serious! We need to get out of this room!”

“You take Caroline out. Klaus and I have this.”

Caroline shook her head.

“No, I’m not going anywhere.”

Henry turned to her.

“James grabbed a knife, and he was planning to use it on me. You think he’s going to stop because he sees you.” Caroline’s face went white. “Now, just get out of here and let me deal with this.”

Signalling for Klaus to follow him, Henry headed towards the door. He had a pretty good inkling that it was his brother there, back out in the rain. And he was going to be both drunk and really angry. At this rate, the only thing they could do was find a way to knock him out and throw him into the coal cellar until he sobered up. Henry didn’t want to risk taking him upstairs.

“James? Are you there?” Henry put a hand to the door and listened, but all he could hear was the rain. “Are you going to calm down so I can let you in?”

For a moment, there was nothing. Then the door burst inwards, the

door edge hitting Henry in the face. As pain exploded in his nose, Henry heard a scream, a male yell that seemed to be in his head. Then he was tackled onto the floor, his head bouncing off the floor. It felt like his head had split open.

But that was nothing to the ripping sensation in his stomach. It was like time had stopped as Henry stared up at James, who had fallen onto him, his eyes wide with horror. Then Henry looked down and saw the hilt of the dagger sticking out of his belly.

He was beginning to feel woozy. The room was spinning, and it felt like he was floating. Had James really just stabbed him?

“Get off him!”

Henry could hear a familiar voice somewhere above him, but he couldn't place it. A moment later, there was a loud bang, and James cried out, falling off him and sprawling on the rug. Then he was aware of someone leaning over him, blurred as he began to float away.

“Henry? Oh, God, Henry!” Something touched his face, but it felt strange. “Someone help me, please! He's injured!”

Injured? Oh, right. He had just been stabbed. Henry opened his mouth, but his throat felt dry. He couldn't get his tongue to move. Whoever was leaning over him started stroking his face.

“Don't try and talk, Henry. Just lie there. We're going to get you help.”

Was that Caroline? It had to be. Henry's hand floundered before he clasped what felt like a hand.

"James?" he croaked. "Where's James?"

"Don't worry about James. Just focus on staying alive." Caroline rested her head against his as someone else pressed on the wound in his stomach, although Henry was barely aware of it. "Don't go anywhere, Henry. Please, don't go. Stay with me."

Henry wanted to stay, but staying meant a lot of pain. And it was dragging him under. He tried to focus on the woman above him, but then the world spun and went black.

Chapter 20

Caroline couldn't focus on the words in the book. They were swirling around and looking like a jumbled mess. Sighing, she put the book aside and rubbed her eyes. She hadn't slept, and she was exhausted. Her body was beginning to shut down.

But she couldn't go to sleep. Not until she knew that Henry was going to be all right.

He lay in the bed beside her, his face as pale as the bandages that had been wrapped around his belly. He had barely stirred as they carried him upstairs, the servants almost sagging under his weight. Caroline had felt useless as she hovered around, wishing she knew what she could do. But instead, Sarah had pulled her back and made her wait, allowing the household staff to focus on their master.

She was surprised at how efficient they were. The housekeeper had Henry's shirt stripped off once they had the dagger out – Caroline hadn't been able to look as that was taken out – and they managed to bind the wound and wrap the bandages around his belly. The servants barely batted an eyelid as they moved him back and forth to secure the dressing. Nobody spoke except for the housekeeper. They just got on with it.

For people Henry had said didn't care about him, they really cared about him now.

It didn't take long before Henry was undressed, cleaned up, and in bed. All through this, Caroline kept pacing around in a panic. She didn't know what to do, and each time she offered to help, she was

ushered up into the corner again. Sarah had told her to step back and calm down, to trust the staff, but Caroline couldn't calm down. She had seen Henry's eyes roll back in his head, and they had scared her.

Had she completely lost him?

He needed a doctor badly, but with the weather outside, they had no hope of the doctor coming until the morning or when the storm stopped. Nevertheless, Klaus had headed off while half of the staff went to look for James and the other half focused on Henry. If he managed to find the doctor in this weather, it would be nothing short of a miracle.

He still hadn't come back, but it was not quite dawn yet. There was a chance he was still on his way back to the house with Doctor Preston in tow. Caroline could only hope; the housekeeper had done really well with Henry, and he was still breathing, but they didn't know how bad it was going to be. Doctor Preston could properly treat him.

And James, if they could find him. After Caroline had hit him with a poker across the head, he had fallen to the floor and curled into a ball. Then, while everyone was focused on Henry, he had managed to get up and out the door into the night. He had left a trail of blood behind him. Had he ended up stabbed himself?

Caroline didn't really care right now. If she saw James again, she was going to hit him again. He could have killed Henry. All for what? A drunken rage was no excuse.

She would like to see James try and talk his way out of this.

There was a gentle knock on the door. Caroline looked around as the door opened, and Sarah stuck her head around the door.

“How is he?” she asked.

“Still not woken up.” Caroline swallowed. “What if he doesn’t wake up? The wound could be deeper than we think.”

“Oh, Caroline.” Sarah came into the room and joined her at the bed, squeezing Caroline’s outstretched hand. “Henry’s going to be fine. He’s tougher than both of us. He’s been through wars at sea and has had worse than this.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better, Sarah.” Caroline looked at Henry, who hadn’t moved. “I can’t believe James did that. And I wish I hadn’t had to see it.”

“I know, dear. I know.” Sarah’s voice was soft and gentle. “Look, why don’t you go and get some sleep? You haven’t slept at all.”

“I can’t leave Henry.”

“I’ll be here with him. You go and rest.”

“But what about your sleep? I’m sure you haven’t slept, either.”

Sarah's mouth twitched.

"I'm used to being up all night. You're not. And I'm sure Henry would want to see that you don't look like death yourself when he wakes up."

Caroline didn't want to leave Henry. Not while he was still unconscious. She wanted to be there when he woke up. But she was starting to flag, and then she heard her stomach growling. Frowning, she pressed her hand to her belly. How was she hungry at a time like this?

"Caroline." Sarah tugged her friend to her feet. "Go and have something to drink to keep your strength up, and then get some sleep. The cook has this delicious tea that she says makes you nice and drowsy in the right setting. I'm sure she could fix you a cup. To relax you, if it won't help you sleep."

Her mouth was feeling quite dry. Maybe a quick drink would make her feel a little less tense and more alert. Caroline sighed.

"All right. But I'm coming straight back."

"If that's what you want to do." Sarah nudged her towards the door. "Go. I'll be here when you get back. Henry isn't going anywhere."

Caroline hoped that was the case. She leaned over Henry and kissed his forehead.

“I’ll be right back, darling. And I want to see you open your eyes when I return.”

“He’ll open them once his body decides he’s ready to wake up.” Sarah sighed and pushed her. “Just go. You need to have some nourishment if you don’t have sleep; otherwise, you’ll be keeling over yourself.”

Caroline reluctantly left the room and made her way through the winding hallways. It felt strange; only a few hours ago, she had been sneaking out of Henry’s bedchamber after a passionate encounter, and now she was leaving at a more sedate pace after he had been stabbed.

Things changed so suddenly in just a few short hours, and Caroline wished it hadn’t.

Her thoughts now wandered back to James. She had come to terms that he was capable of harming others for his own enjoyment, but to actually stab his brother? Did he mean to kill him, or was that the drink making him act out and go after Henry with a knife?

She remembered the brief moment when she saw the look in James’ eyes, right before she hit him. He was staring at Henry in alarm. It was like realisation had dawned that he had done something really wrong.

There was still a part of him that didn’t want to hurt Henry. He had felt some remorse. Caroline could only hope he was still remorseful when he returned and found out his brother was near death.

He's not near death. He's going to live, and he's going to be fine.

I hope so. I couldn't bear it if he died.

Caroline headed downstairs, reaching the foyer, when there came shouts from the drawing room. Curious, she headed towards the closed door, only to have it flung open and almost hit her. Caroline squeaked and jumped back before she was hit.

“Apologies, Lady Caroline.” Creek entered the foyer first. “But you’re going to need to step back a moment. We’re bringing Lord Beaufort through.”

“What ... you actually found him?”

Before Klaus could answer, four footmen came staggering through the door, carrying an unconscious James between them. His face was grey, and he was soaking wet. It looked like he had been sleeping out in the rain. Then Caroline saw the blood on his shirt. And it looked like he was barely breathing.

Dear God, what on earth had he done?

Caroline stared as the servants headed towards the stairs. She grabbed Creek’s arm as he went past.

“Where did you find him? What happened?”

“He was under a tree deep in the forest just outside the grounds.” Creek ran a hand through his wet hair. His clothes were wet and covered in mud. “Somehow, he managed to get that far before he collapsed. It took us a while to find him. Not very easy to access the part of the forest he had taken up refuge.”

“There ... there’s blood on him.” Caroline frowned at the footman. “Did someone attack him?”

“He was bleeding when we reached him, My Lady. Lipscomb reckons he stabbed himself with the dagger during his drunken rampage before he stabbed Lord Bannock.”

“And ... do you think he’s going to die as well?”

Creek frowned.

“I’m not a doctor, My Lady. I can’t answer that.” He turned as the front doors were flung open. “But I think someone else can do that for me.”

Caroline looked past him and saw Klaus coming in, the tall, thin figure of Doctor Preston following him. He had managed to get the doctor; the rain had stopped a short while ago, so they must have managed to travel up here.

She touched Creek’s arm.

“Go to Lady Lakeford and tell her Doctor Preston is here. I’ll apprise him of the situation.”

“Yes, My Lady.”

Creek hurried off, and Caroline moved to meet the doctor, who was looking around in bemusement.

“Doctor Preston. Thank you for coming.”

“Lady Caroline?” The doctor raised an eyebrow. “What are you doing here at this hour?”

“My friend and I got stranded in the storm, so Lord Bannock allowed us to stay after dinner.” Caroline pointed towards the stairs. “He’s upstairs with a knife wound in his stomach. The servants have tended to him, but he still needs a doctor.”

Doctor Preston looked at Klaus, who looked wet and exhausted.

“Klaus here said that Lord Beaufort had gone mad with drink and had started attacking people with a knife. Did he stab Lord Bannock?”

“He did.” Caroline swallowed. “He also managed to stab himself. We don’t know how bad it is.”

“And where is Lord Beaufort?”

“He’s just been brought in. He was out in the rain for some time.”
Caroline looked around. “I believe he was taken up to his room.”

“Then I’ll check on him first.” Doctor Preston paused. “I saw a carriage coming in through the gates at the bottom of the drive just now. I believe it’s the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall. They’re not going to like this.”

Caroline’s heart sank. She had hoped they would get both brothers looked at and tended to before the parents came home. Although what they were going to think about the situation, she had no idea.

They were going to blame Henry for it; Caroline was sure about that. That was not fair; Henry wouldn’t have harmed a fly. He tried to stop James from harming anyone else, and he got stabbed for his troubles.

Just then, they heard the clattering of horses’ hooves and carriage wheels on gravel. Doctor Preston shook his head and headed to the stairs.

“I’m going to check on the patients. That’s what I’m here for, isn’t it?”

Caroline scowled at his retreating back. Coward. She had no idea what to say to them. Their interactions had been few and far between – the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall were a little too haughty for her – so

how would she explain to them that their sons were both at death's door due to one's actions?

"Lady Caroline?" Klaus hovered near her. "Are you all right? You look like you're about to faint."

"I'm fine. I think." Caroline smoothed her hands down her dress. "I will have to speak to them and explain what's happened. Will you stay as a witness, Klaus? I don't want to be on my own with them. I don't know how they'll react."

"Of course, My Lady."

That was something, at least. Caroline wasn't really looking forward to being stuck in a room with Henry's parents while they were demanding answers. She didn't know if she could give them what they needed to know.

They would be trying to put the blame on Henry. Caroline was sure of that. She couldn't let that happen. Even if she hated Henry, she couldn't allow his reputation to be sullied by his selfish, manipulative younger brother.

She loved him too much to just stand by and let him get ruined by his own parents.

Love? Did you just say you loved him?

Yes, I did. And it's not as scary as I thought it was going to be.

There were voices outside, and then the grand figures of the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall entered the house. The duke looked around in confusion.

“Where are the servants? What’s happening?”

“Oh, goodness!” The duchess was staring at Klaus. “What on earth have you been doing, Klaus? You look like you’ve been rolling around in the mud.”

“I got caught in the rain, Your Grace.” Klaus went into a low bow. “I had to fetch Doctor Preston.”

“Doctor Preston?” Lady Cornwall frowned. “What do you mean, you had to fetch Doctor Preston? Is James unwell?”

Klaus hesitated, and Caroline saw him glance at her. Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward and dropped into a curtsy.

“Your Grace, I’m Caroline Folton, Lord Bingham’s daughter.”

“I know who you are. You’re one of our neighbours.” Lady Cornwall’s frown deepened. “What are you doing here? I don’t recall us having guests.”

“It wasn’t planned.” Caroline gestured towards the morning room. “Shall we go and sit down? I’ll explain everything.”

#

Caroline was not looking forward to this. She would rather run the other way than face Henry’s parents. But they deserved to know what was going on. And Caroline wanted to get her word in before James came around and told them his own tale.

“Look, what is going on here, Lady Caroline?” Cornwall demanded as they followed her into the morning room. “We went away to Bath for a few days, and we’ve come back to find the house in chaos, the servants not doing their duties, mud and water all over the floor, and our neighbour present. That’s not what we expected to find upon our return home.”

“It’s probably Henry’s doing again.” Lady Cornwall huffed as she sat down, dusting down her skirts. “He’s always doing something outrageous. I bet he went for a wander out in the storm last night to meet a young lady, and things got out of hand.” She looked Caroline over. “It wasn’t you he went out to meet, was it?”

“No! He hasn’t stepped foot outside the house since before the storm came upon us.”

“Then why are you here?” Lady Cornwall arched an eyebrow. “I thought you didn’t care for our son at all. He did hurt you, as I recall.”

Caroline took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“There is a lot to tell you, Your Grace, but your son and I are not at odds with each other.”

“That doesn’t explain why you’re here,” Cornwall snapped. “James wouldn’t have allowed you to be here without a chaperone. What was Henry thinking?”

Caroline gritted her teeth. How was she meant to keep her composure when this insufferable man was already deciding the worst?

“First, Your Grace, I am here because your son invited me to dinner. I had a chaperone with me, and he invited us to stay because the storm would have made the roads impassable. He was looking out for us. And second, why do you always assume that Henry’s the one who has to be causing trouble? You have two sons ...”

“James would never do anything so ridiculous.” Lady Cornwall waved a hand. “He’s a good boy.”

“Good enough that he got a servant pregnant?”

That hadn’t meant to come out, but Caroline couldn’t stop herself. Lady Cornwall froze. By the door, Klaus shuffled from foot to foot, looking like he would rather be anywhere but where he was right now. Cornwall narrowed his eyes at Caroline.

“What did you say?”

“I’ve seen the child, Your Grace. There is no doubt that your younger son has fathered a child. But you’re willing to believe that he didn’t have anything to do with her because he said so.” Caroline snorted. “I only realised recently how good a liar he was, and believing he was a good man would have ended up with me in a similar position.”

Lady Cornwall’s face went white.

“How dare you?”

“How dare I? How dare you?” Caroline had told herself that she needed to maintain her composure, but she couldn’t. Her frustration at these people willing to believe James was a saint when he was anything but was bubbling fiercely. “You never gave your younger son any boundaries whatsoever, and now what’s happened? He’s stabbed your older son, and both of them are currently upstairs at death’s door because he was stupid enough to run away into the storm.”

Both duke and duchess looked stunned. Cornwall spluttered, “They ... they’re both ...”

“Both of them could die because James Beaufort chose to be a selfish, jealous coward, and all you can say is what did Henry do this time?” Caroline pointed towards the door. “Your eldest son was trying to stop him from being a drunken fool around the house, and he got a knife in the stomach for his troubles. This wasn’t Henry’s doing; it was James’. Just like these scars I’m carrying are his doing.” She pointed at her forehead and then held up her hand, watching as the duchess flinched. “James is the one who hurt me all those years ago, but it was so convenient to blame Henry, wasn’t it? James is a golden boy; he can

do no wrong. You did plenty wrong, the pair of you, by not actually being proper parents.”

Cornwall's lips tightened.

“I know you're distressed, Lady Caroline, but you do not speak to us like this. It's not something we will tolerate.”

“And your refusal to believe that James is not a good man is not something I will tolerate!” Caroline shot back. She was aware that she was raising her voice, but she didn't care. “Henry was trying to do the right thing. He was attempting to keep everyone safe while his brother was getting violent. Now he might die because nobody said to his brother that he shouldn't behave in such a manner. And you don't even care!”

Lady Cornwall drew herself to her feet, fixing Caroline with a haughty stare.

“I don't know why you think you can talk to us like this, but our family dynamics are none of your business.”

“It is when the man I love is getting unfairly maligned.”

Caroline was sure she could hear a pin drop. Both the duke and duchess stared at her like she had just appeared out of thin air.

“You ... you love him?” the duchess murmured. “But ... what ... how

...?”

“There is no how about it, Your Grace. I saw what you did in the beginning, and then I began to realise that everything had been a lie.” Caroline looked from the duchess to the duke, who looked like Caroline had just slapped him. “You two became so invested in James that you completely ignored Henry. You were prepared that a brother protecting the younger one from your punishments was the bad one. You never bothered to question it, and James took advantage of it. He could do whatever he wanted, and you would always blame Henry. For a while, so did I. But I was able to see the real man, the hero. And that’s what I fell in love with.”

She was shaking, and Caroline felt like her legs were going to give way. She could feel her stomach churning, and she decided this was the best time to go. Dropping a quick curtsy, Caroline headed towards the door.

“I’m going back to Henry. I want to be at his side when he wakes up. Hopefully, Doctor Preston can save both brothers, and I hope to God that he does because I want James to face his actions.” She paused by Klaus. “If you don’t believe me, you can always ask the servants. They were present when James returned home drunk and started waving a knife around. And they are the ones who found James after he ran away. You may not be willing to believe your precious child is a bad person, but maybe more than one account will change your mind.”

Cornwall strode towards her.

“I don’t know what Henry’s put into your head, but I ...”

He stopped when there was a loud bang on the front door. Caroline

opened the door and saw four burly men in uniform entering the foyer, looking very stiff and overbearing. Even Caroline felt a shiver down her back. These had to be the Cavalry Staff Corps that Henry had mentioned. She could see why they were not men to mess with.

“What’s going on now?” Cornwall snarled. He pushed past Caroline and entered the hall, glaring at the officers. “Why is everyone intruding in my house?”

The soldiers saluted. Then one of them stepped forward and bowed.

“Your Grace, we are here to apprehend your son, Lord Beaufort, to return him back to the army for his crimes.”

Cornwall’s eyes widened.

“You what? What crimes? My son hasn’t done anything.”

“He has shown cowardice in the face of the enemy and deserted. We did send a warning that we would be arriving.”

Lady Cornwall gasped, making Caroline jump. She hadn’t realised that the duchess had moved to stand behind her. Cornwall spluttered, turning to stare at Caroline. Caroline shook her head.

“If you won’t believe me or the servants, perhaps you’ll believe them? I’m sure they can fill you in on how much of a soldier your son really is.” She bowed her head and went towards the stairs. “I’m going to sit

with Henry. If James has any luck left, his brother will recover. Otherwise, James will have more than desertion to worry about.”

A final jab that wasn't needed, but Caroline had already had enough of Cornwall and his wife. The two of them had immediately launched into believing Henry had done something wrong, and he wasn't there to defend himself. Caroline had no care for the parents right now.

She just wanted to get back to Henry. Hopefully, Doctor Preston could make sure he lived.

Chapter 21

The first thing Henry was aware of was the pain in his stomach. It really hurt, like someone had stuck a knife in him and twisted it.

Wait a minute. Didn't that actually happen?

Oh, it did. I was stabbed.

The fog cleared, and Henry remembered what happened. James had landed on him and had stabbed him. Then he had been hit, and he vanished. Was he hurt as well? Had he sobered up?

Henry had a feeling the hit to his head was worse than he thought because he had been more worried about James than himself.

“I think he’s waking up.”

That was a voice he vaguely recognised, but Henry couldn’t quite place it. Then a voice he did know reached his ears.

“Is he going to be all right?”

Caroline. His Caroline was here. Henry wanted to reach towards her, but he couldn’t move his arms; they just felt too heavy.

“As long as he has plenty of rest and doesn’t do anything stupid, then he should.” It was Doctor Preston. It had to be. “Make sure he stays in bed, Lady Caroline. I don’t want his health to deteriorate as well.”

“I’ll make sure he stays where he is, Doctor. And thank you for coming when you did.”

“At least it’s stopped raining. I was not happy when Klaus came to fetch me and it was still raining.”

“He’s not planning on doing that again in a hurry.”

“Let’s hope not.” Doctor Preston paused. “I hope some peace can be found. There’s too much here that can’t be laid to rest until it’s addressed.”

“Of course. I understand.”

Henry was confused. What was he talking about? It sounded like a riddle, and Henry’s head was hurting too much to solve riddles. He forced his eyes open, blinking in the muted light. Two figures were at the end of the bed, and Henry immediately recognised Caroline. She had her hair loose about her shoulders, and even with his glazed vision, he could see how exhausted she looked.

He licked his lips and swallowed.

“Caroline?”

Caroline turned, her eyes widening when she saw him staring at her. She hurried to his side, taking his hand as he tried to lift it off the bed.

“I’m here, Henry.” She sat on the bed, managing a smile as her eyes shone with tears. “I’m here.”

“Welcome back to the land of the living, Lord Bannock.” Doctor Preston gave him a nod. “It’s good to see you conscious.”

“It feels good to be conscious.” Henry’s throat felt like he had swallowed sand. “What were you talking about, Doctor? What did you mean that there is too much to be addressed?”

Doctor Preston’s smile faded, and he glanced at Caroline, who gave him a slight shake of her head.

“I’ll not say anything more. I need to go back and see how Lord Beaufort is.” He gave Henry a slight bow. “Rest well, My Lord.”

He left the room, and Henry looked up at Caroline. She smiled at him and leaned over to kiss his forehead.

“I’m glad you’re awake.”

“You kissed me in the wrong place.”

Caroline shook her head.

“Nice to see you haven’t lost your wit.”

“That wasn’t wit.” Henry managed to raise his arm – God, it was heavy – and gestured at his mouth. “You really kissed me in the wrong place.”

Caroline linked her fingers with his. Then she leaned over and kissed him. Henry felt a stirring in his gut as he accepted the kiss. Even in his bed and pain rippling across his stomach, he still desired her.

“I thought you were dead,” Caroline whispered against his mouth before drawing back, wiping the tears from her cheeks. “When your eyes rolled up like they did, I thought ...”

“It’s going to take more than a knife to the gut to get rid of me.” Henry’s hand was still feeling like he was controlling something that didn’t belong to his body as he laid his fingers over his stomach. “Doctor Preston did a good job patching me up.”

“You should be thanking your servants for that. They were the ones who saved your life and tended to you.”

Henry blinked.

“The servants did?”

“Yes.” Caroline smiled. “You might think they see you like everyone else does, but they do care. And they were very efficient.”

Henry had not expected that. He had thought he would either be waking up still on the floor of the drawing room or finding himself at the pearly white gates with St Peter. At least he was lying on something soft, and Caroline was certainly a more welcoming sight than an angel.

“What ... what happened? Where’s James?”

Caroline’s smile faded a little.

“He ... James is not looking good.”

“What do you mean?”

Caroline swallowed. She looked like she wanted to run. Henry reached for her.

“Caroline, talk to me. What happened to James?”

“After he stabbed you, I ... I hit him with a poker to get him off you. While we were busy with you, he managed to get out the door and vanished.” Caroline looked at her hands twisting in her lap. “The servants went out looking for him, and they found him a couple of hours ago, unconscious under a tree just out of the grounds.”

“Did he get caught in the storm?”

“Doctor Preston thinks the stab wound in his pelvis had something to do with him finally collapsing. That and the head wound from when I hit him ...”

“Stab wound?” Henry stared. “But ... but I didn’t ...”

“We know you didn’t touch him. It looked self-inflicted.”

“He stabbed himself?”

“More like it was an accident when he fell on the dagger. It wasn’t deep, but stumbling through the mud and undergrowth, the wound became infected. Even the storm couldn’t clean him.” Caroline bit her lip. “He’s done what he can, but he thinks with where the wound is, he’s not confident that James will pull through. It’s possible that he nicked a vital artery, and he’s been slowly bleeding out.”

Henry felt like he had woken up but into a strange dream. He had expected James to be parading around like he hadn’t done anything wrong, calling Henry a wimp for passing out over a stab wound. He

had not expected to hear that James had run and was on death's door himself.

"He ... he's going to die?"

"Doctor Preston is leaning towards that. Like I said, he's done what he could ..."

"Do our parents know? Do Mother and Father know that James is ...?"

"They came back shortly after James was carried up to his room." Caroline grimaced. "I have to confess that I lost my temper with them."

"You lost your temper?" Henry frowned. "On my parents?"

"They spoke as if they expected the mess they walked into to be your fault. Immediately, they suspected you. And I couldn't stand it." Caroline shook her head. "I snapped. I'm not proud of it, but I scolded both of them for speaking about you like that. They weren't willing to believe that James was the one who had done everything in the past. It wasn't until the army ..."

"Wait, what? The army?"

"They turned up shortly after your parents did. To say your father was shocked that they were coming to arrest James for desertion was an understatement. I'm surprised he didn't have a seizure." Caroline

paused. "All the servants had been protesting your innocence and standing up for you. There's not a soul in this house who isn't on your side."

Now Henry really felt like he was in an odd dream. That couldn't be happening. Since when did the servants stand by him and say he was not the monster his parents made him out to be? This had to be a different reality.

"You're looking shocked, Henry." Caroline touched her hand to his chest. "Did you not expect that?"

"After what I've grown up with, no." Henry frowned. "I thought they would turn it around on me. The number of times they've witnessed James commit whatever atrocity and I'm always blamed, I thought it would be the same."

"They're more loyal to you than you think. And the Cavalry Staff Corps put Lord and Lady Cornwall in their place. The charges and the things they told them about James' time in the army have given them pause for thought."

Henry should have been happy about the fact James had been found out. Satisfied, even. But instead, he just felt a hollow sensation in his chest. He didn't have much love for James anymore – it was practically gone – but the tiny sliver that was still there had him wanting to protect James.

You protected him long enough. James is now in danger of losing his life because he never took responsibility. And that is not your fault.

Caroline was looking pale, watching him with a smile as her eyes shone with the rest of her tears.

“I was so scared when I saw you with that knife in your belly, Henry,” she whispered. She reached up and stroked his cheek. “I thought you were going to die.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m not going anywhere yet.” Henry managed to lift his arm and brushed his fingers across her chin, smiling at her. “It’s going to take more than that to get rid of me.”

“I hope so.” Caroline leaned over and kissed him. “I love you. And I’m glad I get to say that now. The thought of you dying and me not having said that ...”

“Don’t say anymore,” Henry cut in gently. “You’ve said it now. And that’s what matters.”

“I hope so.”

“I know so.” Henry smiled and cupped her jaw in his hand. “There were many nights while I was at sea where I lay in my hammock thinking about you, wondering if you were happy. I often imagined myself offering marriage and you accepting. But with how things were between us, I didn’t think it would ever happen.”

Caroline stared.

“You wanted to marry me? Even though I was horrible to you?”

“I suppose I’m a glutton for punishment. I want something I cannot have.” Henry brushed a thumb across her lips. “I wish I could change things, Caroline; I really do. But I don’t regret how I feel about you. I’d marry you in a heartbeat if you’d allow me. Make up for the time that was taken from us because of lies. Whatever I could to make you happy.”

Caroline was still looking bewildered, her mouth open.

“Was that a proposal? Or were you just saying that?”

“A bit of both, I guess.”

“Shouldn’t you be asking me properly?”

Henry groaned.

“Don’t make me get out of bed and go on one knee. That’s too much for me.”

Caroline smiled.

“All I ask is that if you are going to propose marriage, do it properly.

The words will be fine.”

Henry had played this moment over and over in his head, but they had always had a romantic quality, not with him lying in bed like this. There had been a few dreams where Caroline had laughed and mocked him before walking away, and those had left Henry in a cold sweat.

From the way Caroline was looking at him right now, there was no chance of her walking away. Even so, Henry’s hand tightened around her fingers.

“That’s hurting, Henry.”

“I just don’t want you to disappear on me.”

“I’m not going to disappear.” Caroline clasped his hand between hers. “Just ask me.”

Why were the words hard to get out now? Henry swallowed.

“Caroline Folton, you are the only woman I want in my life. The one I want to wake up to in the morning and the last one I want to see when I go to sleep. I know my career as a sailor is going to make that difficult, and you could be left at home for months on end, but knowing you’re at home waiting for me is enough. If you say you’ll marry me, you’ll make me feel like an admiral of the fleet.”

Caroline laughed.

“That is an interesting way of doing it, I must admit.”

“Please don’t laugh. I was serious.”

“Forgive me; I just wasn’t expecting that.” She leaned over and kissed him. “And the answer is yes. I will marry you. And I don’t care if you being at sea keeps us apart. I’ll be there for you.”

The relief flooded through Henry, and he tugged her down for another kiss, drawing it out until he needed to breathe. Then he hugged her, Caroline falling onto him with a squeal.

“Henry, careful!”

“I just needed to do that.” Henry allowed Caroline to sit up. “But now there’s something else I need to do. And it will require me getting up.”

“What?” Caroline frowned. “But Doctor Preston ...”

“I know; he told you that I’m to stay in bed and rest. But there’s something I can’t do when I’m lying here.” He reached for her. “I’m going to need you to help me up.”

“Tell me what you’re going to do first. I’m not helping you,

otherwise.”

“I’m going to see James. I need to see my brother.”

Henry hadn’t planned on that, but he felt the need to go and see James. If he was going to die, he didn’t want James to go without saying a few words. Even with his resentment towards his brother, Henry needed to get a few things out.

Caroline didn’t look happy about that.

“I’m not sure about this, Henry.”

“Just do this for me, Caroline. Please.”

Caroline looked like she was going to refuse him. But she nodded and eased the sheets off him.

“All right. At least your servants left your breeches on.”

“You didn’t want to help get me dressed?”

“Don’t make me force you to stay here, Henry.”

Henry sighed. He was looking forward to Caroline helping him with his clothes. Preferably out of them. He slowly sat up, grimacing as he tried not to keel back over again.

“Just find a shirt for me, and then see if you can find a servant. I don’t want you falling over.”

“I will.” Caroline hesitated. “Are you sure about this, Henry?”

“I’m sure.”

James had done a lot of things, and Henry did feel some resentment towards his brother. But it didn’t take a smart person to know that James was dealing with many demons, and he had dealt with them in the wrong way. He could hold onto that anger at not having the relationship he wanted with his parents or having the woman he loved much sooner.

Or he could give himself some peace and forgive him. If this was going to be the only time he got to forgive James, Henry was going to take it.

Epilogue

“You look so beautiful, Caroline.”

Caroline turned to see Lady Cornwall standing behind him. The duchess was giving her a smile with tears in her eyes. It still felt strange having the older woman treating her with warmth after their interaction almost a month ago.

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Caroline smoothed her hands down her dress. “I’m glad the dress fit me. Your seamstress is a wonder with the needle.”

“She absolutely is.” Lady Cornwall took Caroline’s hands and looked her up and down. “You look every bit a lady. I’m glad my old wedding dress could be used for one of my son’s weddings. James ... he wouldn’t have appreciated the gesture like Henry.”

At least she wasn’t breaking down at the mention of her younger son’s name. Caroline could see she was wobbling, but the duchess held herself together. She had finally managed to regain her composure whenever talking about James in the last week while the wedding plans were underway. It was like she had found something to throw her energy into.

It did feel strange to have a wedding in the chapel on the Cornwall estate only a few weeks after a funeral, but both sets of parents said it was not to be put off. James was given a good funeral, and he had been made the focus of everyone’s attention. That was not going to happen with his brother’s wedding.

Caroline knew that Henry was glad he could say what he needed to his brother before he passed away a few hours later. Doctor Preston hadn't been impressed that the older son was out of bed, but neither he nor the duke and duchess had stopped Henry as he knelt by James' bedside and took his hand, talking like he was in a confessional. His words had left Caroline holding back the tears, especially when he said that he forgave his brother for what he had done.

It took a strong man to forgive someone who had almost killed him. And Caroline loved him even more for that.

Her husband did look every bit the heir to a dukedom as he talked to his father and Lord Bingham, both men wearing looks of pride with Bingham clapping his hand on Henry's shoulder. And he looked far more relaxed now, especially with his parents.

Caroline hadn't been privy to their hours-long conversation about the past and how James had manipulated everyone, but she knew it had been filled with quite a bit of shouting and lots of tears. Whatever had been said seemed to have changed things, and Henry was starting to regain the trust and love of his parents. Caroline was glad about that; he deserved to have his mother and father proud of him.

It was a shame it was at the expense of James' life, but it was there now. Caroline knew there would be a lot of patching up to do, but Henry wasn't going to be alone in it. She was not leaving his side.

A movement to her right had Caroline turning, and she saw Sarah had joined them. The duchess let go of Caroline's hands and gave Sarah a nod before moving away to join Lady Bingham, who was talking to the priest and looking like her smile was going to split her face.

“Caroline.” Sarah hugged her friend. “I don’t think I’ve seen you smile this much in a long time.”

“Did you think this was ever going to happen?”

“The moment I saw the way you two were together, I just knew.” Sarah grinned. “You were falling for him long before you acknowledged it. You just didn’t want to admit it.”

“I didn’t think it was possible to fall for someone you hated.”

“You’ve made it possible.”

Caroline looked over at Henry again. He was speaking to his father, both men looking a little tearful. Then they shared an embrace, Cornwall looking like he was about to cry. Caroline felt a stab of sympathy for the man. He had needed to change his perspective on his sons after so many years, and it had to be tough on him. Henry would certainly appreciate it, though. He wouldn’t admit it, but he had always been seeking his father’s love and approval. He wanted to be seen and heard.

That was happening now.

“I’m sure James would have enjoyed this wedding as well.” Sarah gestured at the rest of the wedding guests, who were milling around the garden. “There are plenty of young ladies who would have enjoyed his attention.”

“I’m sure that would have made him happy.” Caroline paused. “Do you think he was remorseful? At the end, I saw a flash of regret when he hurt Henry. Do you think he would have expressed his remorse if he had woken up?”

“I like to think he would have. I saw the regret as well. Even though he did all those things to Henry, he never meant to hurt him. There was still some brotherly love there.” Sarah spread her hands. “James just went looking for love in the wrong way. His way of getting attention just made it worse, but he didn’t know any better.”

Caroline was glad that Henry had managed to say he forgave James for his actions. She hoped James had been aware enough to hear that.

Hands rested on her shoulders, and Caroline turned to see Henry. He smiled at her, love shining in his eyes.

“Are you enjoying yourself, my wife?”

Wife. Caroline liked the sound of that. She smiled back.

“Very much so, my husband.”

Sarah groaned.

“Great. Now the two of you are going to become soppy. I think I’ll leave you to it.”

“And I love you, too, Sarah.” Caroline squeezed her friend’s arm. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“I wouldn’t have missed this for the world.” Sarah winked at Henry. “I think you’re going to be kept here for a while. If you want to be ... alone with your wife, I suggest taking the current opportunity. I’m sure nobody will mind.”

Henry laughed.

“I’ll take the hint, Sarah.”

With a final impish grin, Sarah walked away, joining Lord Bingham. Caroline turned to Henry.

“Was she trying to imply ...?”

“Oh, she was. In her usual subtle way.” Henry took her hand. “Come on.”

Caroline didn’t protest as they slipped into the house, seen only by Klaus as he came out with a tray of drinks. Klaus nodded at them, but his expression didn’t change, although Caroline was sure he had a mischievous look in his eye.

“Are you sure about this, Henry?” Caroline asked as they crossed the house and went up the stairs. “Once people know we’ve gone, they’re going to know where we are.”

“So what? No one’s going to bother us, and they would be stupid enough even to try. Besides,” Henry flashed her a grin as he urged her to follow him up the stairs, “why should what happens on the wedding night happen at night?”

Caroline didn’t know what to say to that. She was aware that certain acts happened between married people, but she had been too shy to ask about them. She didn’t dare ask her mother what happened, and she certainly wasn’t going to ask her father. It did make her feel a little apprehensive.

But the thought of finally being alone with Henry and satisfying the desire in her belly made her hurry after her husband as they headed to their bedchamber. Henry let her in first, following in quickly and shutting the door. Then he pushed her up against the door and kissed her, his hands running over her body as his mouth claimed hers.

“I’ve been wanting to get my hands on you like this for so long.” He growled, shoving his hands under her skirts. “You have no idea how tempting you look to me, Caroline.”

Caroline didn’t know what to say to that, her mind turning to mush as his hands ran over her bare thighs, his mouth at her throat. She could feel his hardness pressing against her belly, and that just built her own fire.

But even as she wanted to grab at him and yank his clothes off, Caroline pressed a hand to his chest.

“I think we’d better take it slow with this dress. I don’t want to explain to your mother what happened to it.”

“I’m sure she will figure it out.” Henry sighed. “But I agree.”

He stepped away and pulled Caroline away from the door, pressing a quick kiss to her mouth before his hands started working slowly, pushing the dress off her shoulders and letting it pool around her feet. Caroline didn’t know if she could speak; her breath lodged in her chest as Henry began to take off her undergarments. He did it with such gentleness despite the fierce desire in his expression. She felt like the desire was running over her skin.

Henry was breathing heavily as he finally divested the last garment from Caroline’s attire, tossing it aside as he stared at her naked body.

“So beautiful.”

Caroline had almost tried to cover herself. She had never been naked like this before, especially not before a man. But the way Henry looked at her spurred her on. She smiled and ran her hands down his chest.

“I think it’s your turn now.”

Henry's nostrils flared, reaching out and tracing a finger down her chest, circling her nipple before travelling down her body.

"In a moment. Let me do this first."

"Do what?"

"This."

Henry tugged her to him, kissing her as his fingers probed between her legs. A finger slid inside her, and Caroline gasped, clutching onto Henry's arms as the strange sensation started a slow burn that made her gasp turn into a moan. Henry's other hand palmed her backside, lifting her onto her toes as he added another finger.

"Put your leg around me, Caroline," he rasped as his fingers shifted their angle, Caroline's body tensing as pleasure rippled through her. "I want to feel more of you."

Caroline couldn't do anything except do as she was told. On one wobbly leg, she lifted the other and managed to hug her thigh around his hip. Henry growled against her neck and then lifted her off the floor. Caroline squealed and grabbed onto him, Henry wrapping her other leg around him. His fingers slid deeper inside her, and the thrusting increased.

Was this lovemaking? If it was, Caroline didn't want it to stop; it felt really good.

Henry carried her to the bed and laid her down, trailing kisses over her chest. He sucked her nipples into her mouth as his thumb brushed against a part of her that had Caroline's hips jerking off the bed. Caroline clutched onto the bedding, unable to catch her breath.

"Henry ..."

"If you want me to stop ..."

"Are you mad? I don't want you to stop." Caroline rolled her hips against his hand. "Please, just ..."

She didn't know what she wanted. All she knew was she wanted more. Henry chuckled and shifted further down, pressing kisses to her belly.

"I know what you want. And you'll have it soon." He nudged her thighs apart as he kneeled on the floor. "First, though, I want to taste you."

"You want to ..."

Caroline broke off with a moan as Henry pressed his face between her legs, his tongue lapping her wet flesh as he kept up the thrust of his fingers. She had never thought this was something that happened. Not that she was complaining; it was making everything twist and build inside her, and soon she was writhing on the bed, trying to clutch onto something that could keep her still and take more of this. More of Henry's mouth churning out her pleasure to the point she had goosebumps, and she was struggling to clutch onto her sanity.

When her pleasure exploded, Caroline momentarily forgot how to breathe, her body going into spasms so hard she was sure her eyes had rolled into the back of her head. And Henry was showing no signs of slowing down, drawing out her pleasure until Caroline was limp on the bed, her body shivering with waves of heat.

“Henry ... I ...”

“I’ve got you.”

Henry removed his fingers from her body, which had Caroline moaning again in protest. She heard the rustling of clothing and then she was tugged down the bed until her hips were on the edge of the mattress. She opened her eyes to see Henry leaning over her, wrapping her legs around his waist. His gaze was full of barely restrained hunger, his hips tightening on her hips.

When he finally entered her, Caroline was practically squirming. His hardness was far wider than his fingers, and it took a moment for her body to adjust. But when it did, it felt incredible. Caroline’s legs tightened around his waist, arching up towards her husband. Henry groaned.

“You look so beautiful like this, Caroline.” He lowered his head and kissed her breasts. “So warm.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be doing something here?” Caroline panted. “I may not be well-versed in lovemaking, but I’m sure just staying still isn’t the way to go about it.”

“You’re not too sore, are you?”

“Just shut up, Henry.” Caroline lifted her hips. “Show me how a man loves a woman. I want to know.”

Henry’s eyes flashed. Then he began to move his hips. Having him move like that felt even better, and Caroline couldn’t hold back her moans. She was sure they were going to be heard at this point, but she didn’t care. Not when she could have Henry like this whenever she wanted.

She clutched onto his shoulders and bit his shoulder as his thrusts increased, his hips pressing his hardness deep inside her with each fast thrust. Caroline could feel her waning pleasure building again, and this time she could feel Henry joining her. His body was tensed up and shaking, growls coming out of him with each thrust. She was starting to see him lose control of himself.

Caroline lay back and watched his face as he rutted into her. He looked magnificent like this, his eyes hooded with his arousal etched into his face. Caroline shifted her legs around his waist and ran her hands over his chest. She wished she could feel his bare chest, but the feel of his clothes against her sensitive skin left her trembling.

Henry growled and shifted up, reaching between them as his fingers went searching. He touched her throbbing flesh and rubbed, which made everything explode. Caroline cried out, writhing underneath him as she rode more waves that crashed into her, clutching onto Henry’s arms as his thrusts reduced but still slammed into her. His body was shaking, or was that still her? Caroline didn’t know.

She was still trying to catch her breath as the final wave started to abate when Henry let out a shout and stiffened, his eyes closing. Caroline could feel him move inside her with his release, and that made her moan. Then he was slumping over her, pulling her in for a kiss as his hips pressed against her, his body still trembling. Caroline's legs were hurting from holding onto him so tightly, but she didn't care. She just wanted to keep hold of him for longer.

Henry broke the kiss, brushing her hair away from her face.

"I love you."

"I love you, too." Caroline tugged his jacket. "Am I going to get to see you naked now?"

"I was going to undress before, but the sight of you ..." Henry shook his head. "I couldn't help myself. I just had to take you."

"Now I want to see you."

"In a moment." Henry kissed her. "Let me get my breath back, and you can see all of this as much as you want."

Caroline liked the sound of that.

THE END

Can't get enough of Caroline and Henry? Then make sure to check out the

[Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...

Who are Theodore and Charles? What will make them hide from Caroline?

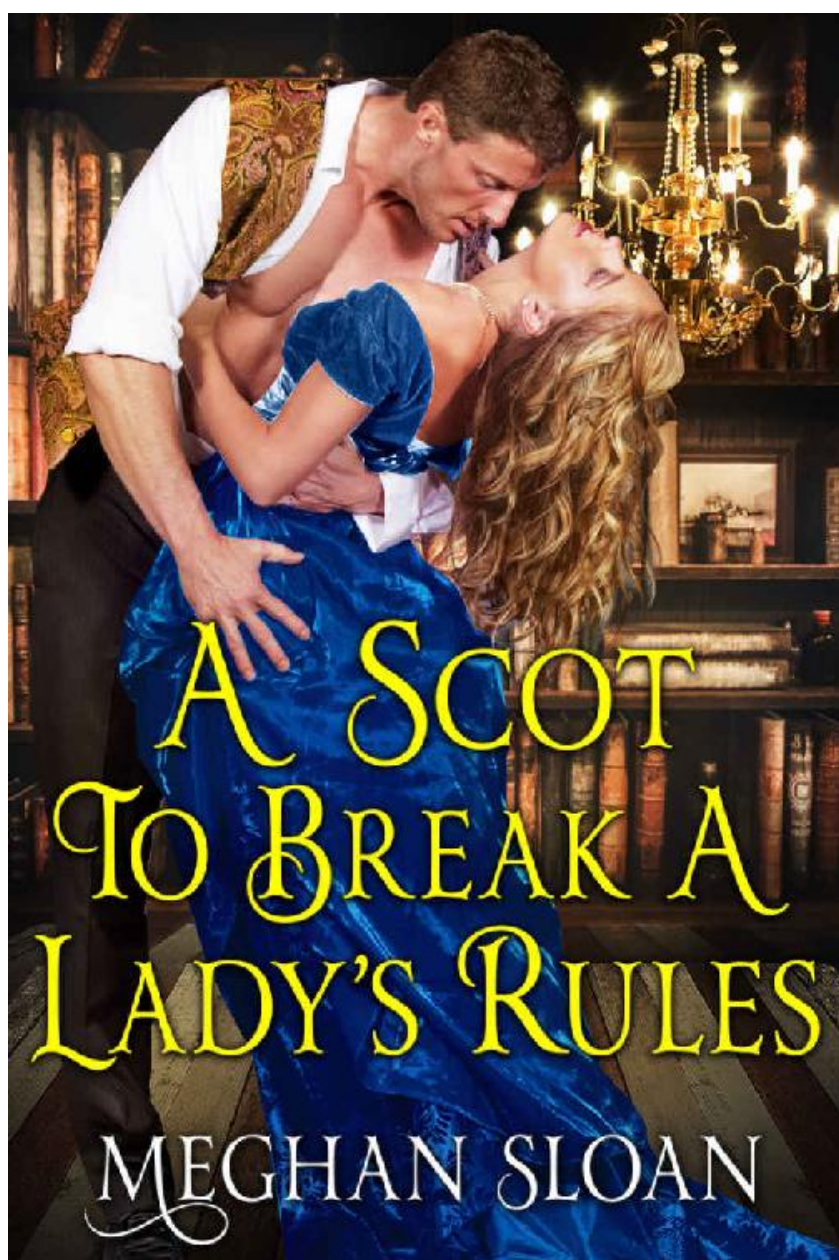
*How will the future relationship between Caroline and Teresa be and what
will Teresa's position in the new house be?*

*Who is Jeremiah Evans and what is the relationship between him and
Teresa?*

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://meghansloan.com/caroline>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first
chapters from “**A Scot to Break a Lady's Rules**”, my Amazon Best-
Selling novel!)*



A Scot to Break a Lady's Rules

Introduction

Lady Cassandra Felton has dreamed of falling wildly in love all of her life. However, her parents have clipped her wings, picking a heartless husband for her and using her as a pawn to fill their coffers. When she meets Arthur Crowley, she realises that he may be the one who will uncover her hidden desires. Will her smouldering lust for him be enough to make her doubt her parents' choices?

A beginning filled with passion...

When Arthur Crowley, Duke of Sandringham, visits a friend in the Lake District, he has no intention of finding a wife. However, the moment he sees Cassandra, he is stricken with her naivety and her irresistible beauty. The only problem is that her father has already arranged for someone to marry her, even though his motives are murky. What is Arthur willing to risk in order to be with a woman so impossible to resist?

But sometimes fate has other plansâ€¦

Though their paths cross at a troubled time, Cassandra and Arthur will become entwined in the flames of their love. Against all odds, will these fierce souls overcome the obstacles standing in their way and go after the passionate affair they long for? Or will they have to tame

their overwhelming feelings out of fear of a scandalous outburst??

Chapter 1

“I have some news for you, Cassandra.”

Cassandra looked up from her food. She and her parents were having dinner, the only sounds coming from their cutlery scraping against the plates as they ate. The noise had been making Cassandra flinch, especially whenever everything else had been practically silent.

She wanted to talk, discuss anything she could think of, but her parents were the type who said people must not say a thing during dinner unless they had guests.

Now she jumped at the chance to talk to her father.

“What is it, Father?”

John Felton, the Duke of Mandrake, looked over at his wife, who simply nodded. Then he turned back to his daughter.

“Your mother and I have decided that it’s time for you to head out into Society.”

For a moment, Cassandra thought she had misheard him. It had been almost a year since she turned eighteen, and she had been begging her parents to go out for her first Season. But her father had said absolutely not.

He never gave a proper reason, just that Cassandra needed to learn how to behave first. She had never really understood what he meant, but she had given up asking for a Season a few months ago.

They had changed their minds? Cassandra looked at her companion sitting across from her. Sarah Beech's eyes were wide in bewilderment. Neither had expected this. Cassandra stared at her father.

"Really? Do you mean that you're allowing me to go outside the estate?"

"Of course. It's best that we do it sooner rather than later." Mandrake speared a brussel sprout with his fork. "We didn't think you were ready last year, but you're ready now. So, you're going to have the Season you've been asking for."

Cassandra almost squealed and started jumping up and down in her seat. But she stopped herself in time when she saw the way her mother was watching her. Probably not the best time to behave in a way her parents called 'undesirable.' Swallowing back her excitement, Cassandra managed a sweet smile.

"Thank you, Father. I promise that I won't let you down."

Mandrake frowned.

“Don’t think this is a chance for you to go back to your former self, Cassandra. Letting you into the world has a purpose.”

“Purpose? What purpose?”

Lady Mandrake picked up her glass and took a sip of her wine.

“We’ve decided that it’s time for you to marry, darling. You’re at the prime age for marriage, and so we need to find you a husband.”

Cassandra’s heart sank. So, they weren’t doing it for her. They were doing it for themselves. Cassandra loved her parents, but they kept treating her like a piece of furniture they could move around when they wanted. She had lost count of how many times they scolded her for acting unladylike.

They had always refused to let her explore her passions. Cassandra hated being restricted and had hoped that entering Society would help the Duke and Duchess realize that she could be trusted to be out beyond the estate's walls. They had to know that she wasn’t completely wild because she chose to have different ideals and an outgoing personality that didn’t fit with their image of a perfect daughter.

They put a lot of pressure on her, and it drove Cassandra mad.

“So, you’re only allowing me to meet people outside of my family so you can find someone to marry me off to.” She said slowly.

“You know your place, even if you choose to deny it.” Lady Mandrake shrugged. “You need a husband.”

“But...”

“No buts, Cassandra.” Mandrake cut in sharply. “We’ve made this decision, and you’re going to listen to us.”

Cassandra glanced at Sarah, wishing that her friend and companion was brave enough to speak up for her. But Sarah was scared of the Duke and Duchess of Mandrake, and she had her head bowed, concentrating on her dinner. Cassandra turned to her father.

“What if I don’t want a husband immediately, Father?”

Mandrake frowned. The idea of waiting to find a husband seemed to be outrageous in his eyes.

“That is not an option, Cassandra.” He snapped. He took a hefty gulp of his wine, still scowling. “It won’t be long before you’re considered too old for marriage, so your mother and I need to start finding you a husband as soon as possible. We did consider doing it last year when you turned eighteen, but you were still too...spirited. That’s not an attractive look on a young lady.”

“Perhaps a gentleman might like that I’m more spirited than another woman.” Cassandra pointed out. “It makes me stand out. Maybe that is considered attractive. But you won’t know until it happens.”

“It is not attractive, and you’ll only end up embarrassing us.”

Cassandra very much doubted it. The few times her parents had had guests over, and Cassandra had slipped out of the confined shell to show who she really was, the guests had been impressed.

She had been given a lot of compliments. But her parents acted as if she had committed a crime, and they had scolded her about her behaviour. Cassandra couldn’t understand why they wouldn’t let her express herself. She was not a puppet.

The idea of finding a husband wasn’t really attractive. Knowing her parents were involved made it even less desirable.

“But I don’t want to marry for a few years, Father.” Cassandra protested. “I’ll have plenty of time to find myself someone to marry and have a family with. There’s no rush.”

Lady Mandrake snorted.

“There are plenty of reasons to rush. You’re getting old.”

“I’m eighteen!”

“And soon you’ll be twenty and unmarried, and then you’ll be considered too old for marriage.” Her mother shook her head.

“Anyway, what do you know about men? Do you know who’s suitable for you?”

“I like to think I’ve got a good sense of character.”

“You don’t know anything about titles or social status, Cassandra. That’s important, and you seem to forget that.” Lady Mandrake pursed her lips in disapproval. “It’s like when you made friends with the gardener’s son and ran around with him playing knights and dragons. A young lady doesn’t do things like that.”

Cassandra took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She was going to get frustrated in a moment, and then she would be scolded for over-expressing herself. Anything above a simple, cool monotone was considered over-expressive, and it made Cassandra want to scream. It was just not fair.

“Mother, apart from Sarah, I’m alone here. I want to interact with other people my age.”

“We’re here. You can interact with us.”

“Are you going to play knights and dragons with me?” Cassandra quipped.

“Don’t talk to your mother like that.” Her father scolded. “The gardener’s son didn’t know his place, and you keep forgetting yours.”

Cassandra glared at him.

“I think Brendan knew his place after you fired his father. It wasn’t even his fault.”

“He didn’t keep his son in line. Reputation is everything. What do you think people would say if they heard that a Duke’s daughter was cavorting around with a gardener’s boy?”

“We were twelve! We weren’t cavorting!”

“You should not have been interacting with him in the first place. That will not happen again.”

He was right that it wasn’t happening again. Cassandra had cried for nearly a week after Brendan and his father were dismissed and told never to return. He was the only person on the estate who was close to her age, and he didn’t mind that she was a Duke’s daughter.

Whenever she had spare time after her lessons, they played together and created games using their imagination. Mrs Edwards, Cassandra’s governess, had actively encouraged it. She said there was nothing wrong with what they were doing, and playing out games was healthy.

Her parents hadn’t thought so. Within a day, Brendan and his father, who was a kind man, were gone, and Mrs Edwards had followed soon after. Her parents had been furious. It was horrifying to see the people who actually chose to treat her like a child disappear, leaving Cassandra with a new governess and servants who refused to interact

with her beyond the formalities.

Lord Mandrake had no idea how suffocating it was to be stuck inside with no one to talk to. So it was no wonder Cassandra acted out in their eyes.

Cassandra put her hands in her lap.

“I want to go into Society and meet people, Father. I want to have a life where I’m not stuck on the estate and not allowed to talk to anyone who isn’t you, Mother or Sarah.”

“You will do as you’re told, Cassandra.” Mandrake shook his head and cut into his meat. “That governess of yours invited too much chaos when she was here. Six years on, and you’re just starting to become what you’re supposed to be.”

“Mrs Edwards said that I should be able to use my imagination without so much restriction. There was nothing wrong with that.”

“You’re a Duke’s daughter. None of what she suggested is acceptable.” He held up a hand as Cassandra started to protest again. “There will be no more arguments on this, Cassandra. You will have a husband before the Season’s finished, and hopefully, they will be able to tame you into a more respectable lady. You had better not show that appalling attitude of yours in front of them, or you’ll end up humiliating us. Do I make myself clear?”

He wanted her to be moulded into what he wanted. He should know by now that doing that was pointless. Cassandra swallowed back what

she wanted to say and picked up her knife and fork, staring at the food on her plate.

“Yes, Father. You make yourself very clear.”

All of a sudden, she had lost her appetite.

#

“Cassie?”

“Hmm?”

Cassandra looked up. Sarah was watching her in the mirror. Then Cassandra remembered. She was sitting at her dressing table while Sarah brushed her hair, tugging the bristles through the tangles that were threatening to form.

She had been so much into her own thoughts that she had forgotten that Sarah was there. Cassandra sighed and rubbed at her eyes.

“Forgive me, Sarah. I didn’t mean to ignore you. I was thinking of something else.”

“You weren’t ignoring me. I’m fine with you thinking quietly.” Sarah gave her a gentle smile. “But you were starting to frown. What were

you thinking about?"

Cassandra knew she could talk about anything with Sarah. Her friend was the daughter of a lowly baronet who had grown up on the other side of Lake Windermere. She had failed in Society because of her status and the fact that she was plain - her parents' words, not Cassandra's - so her father had reached out to the Duke of Mandrake, asking if there was a position he had for Sarah.

Lord Mandrake had immediately offered to let her be Cassandra's companion. Now Cassandra was eighteen, she was too old for a governess, and he wanted to have someone watching over her. So, Sarah had arrived a week after Mrs McMahon left, and Cassandra knew why her companion had been chosen.

But there was a secret side to Sarah that her parents hadn't known about. She had a spirited side of her, an adventurous attitude that she had to hold back, but whenever she smiled, it made her eyes twinkle. Cassandra had noticed it immediately and knew they were going to become good friends. And they were, even if her parents thought Sarah was making Cassandra behave.

They had no idea of any of the things the two young ladies got up to.

So, if Cassandra confided in Sarah about anything, it never went any further. She picked at a loose thread on her nightgown.

"I'm excited about finally leaving the house. Being told that I have to stay with family and I'm not allowed to go out of sight of the house takes its toll on me. I feel like a bird trapped in a cage. But going out to simply find a husband? I can't get excited about that."

“Your parents only want what is best for you.”

“How is finding me a husband I might not even like the best for me, Sarah? Why do I have to restrain who I really am so a gentleman finds me attractive?” Cassandra huffed. “It’s just not fair. I have so many restrictions on me that it feels like I’m going mad.”

Sarah sighed.

“I’m afraid it’s the way of Society. There is a specific ideal, and we all have to follow it.”

“Especially when it comes to my parents,” Cassandra muttered. She glowered at her reflection. Her hair was longer than ever, and it was beginning to make her head hurt. It was thick, so it made her hair really heavy. But she wasn’t permitted to have her hair cut more than a slight trim. Her mother wanted her to have long, gorgeous hair.

Image was everything to her mother and father. They were obsessed with looking perfect, and because Cassandra was strong in personality and wasn’t afraid to explore something new, they disapproved of her. They considered Cassandra to be flawed and untameable, which was unfair. What was wrong with being different? Cassandra didn’t think it was a problem.

Her parents thought otherwise.

“Oh, darling,” Sarah put the brush down and put her hands on

Cassandra's shoulders. "I love you. I love your ability to be sweet and bright, and I adore your fun-loving nature. It's what has made the last ten months enjoyable after having a disaster of a Season myself. I'm surprised we haven't gotten caught with the things we get up to on the estate."

"There's nothing to do on the estate unless I want to stab my hands with needles or cut my fingers on paper," Cassandra grumbled. "You have to use your imagination, but when I do that, I'm scolded. If they gave me something to do that was actually interesting, I'm sure I wouldn't have a problem. But they keep things so bland, and it's no wonder that I go off and do my own thing."

The most interesting thing they could do without being silly was going for walks. Long walks. But, even then, Cassandra had to be careful with which paths she took. They all have to be on the estate, and she couldn't have the house out of sight, even for just a moment. Cassandra ignored that rule because it was ridiculous. It was like they thought she was going to sneak off the estate and interact with the young men in the village.

If they didn't treat her like a caged animal, she wouldn't have the temptation to do so.

"Your parents do love you, Cassie," Sarah said gently. "And they want the best for you."

"But is it the best for me? It doesn't feel like it."

"I know, but I'm sure you'll understand where they're coming from one day."

Cassandra doubted it. She had been dealing with that all her life. In the beginning, she hadn't known any better, but the older she got and the more questions she asked, the more Cassandra realized that it wasn't healthy. Her parents were far too protective, and they didn't see anything wrong. No matter how much she protested, they refused to bend.

It was hardly a surprise that Cassandra yearned for something more out of life. She wanted to be able to have some freedom, do what she wanted. If she managed to obtain a husband, it would be of her own volition. She would be able to choose, and he would love her no matter what she did. A decent man would appreciate his wife being someone with a less restrained approach to life.

Cassandra had seen how restricted and cold her parents were, even to each other. It may work for them, but it wouldn't for her.

"What's wrong with expressing myself a little bit?" Cassandra got up and started to pace across the room. "They didn't give me any friends until you came along because they were scared of me straying. I'm surprised I know how to talk to someone! How am I supposed to entertain myself in a little room with Mrs McMahan all day?"

"At least you don't have a governess anymore." Sarah pointed out.

That was something. Cassandra had loved Mrs Edwards, but then she was forced to leave after letting her charge have a little too much freedom, and Mrs McMahan had come in. She had been a strict disciplinarian and made Cassandra focus on her studies.

That wouldn't have been a problem if it hadn't been for the knowledge she wasn't allowed to go out of the governess's sight. She had very strong ideas on what a young lady should do, and Cassandra running off to play a make-believe game was not a part of it.

She hadn't even been allowed to read what she wanted to read. Instead, Mrs McMahon made her read the most boring books possible, so Cassandra had to sneak a book into her room to read after she was put to bed. It made her exhausted, but it was worth it. She loved to read, and she wasn't about to be put off it because of a governess who said she shouldn't read things like *The Monk* or *Pamela*.

God, she hated that woman. It had been a relief to know Mrs McMahon was leaving because her child was of age now. Cassandra didn't bother to come and say farewell. If she had, she would have said something that was very unladylike. Her mother hadn't been impressed by her manners, but Cassandra didn't think she should give a person she despised any attention.

She had enjoyed learning. She liked to find out things about their past and present, and she had a quick mind. But it was difficult to fully immerse herself with a lady who didn't even allow Cassandra to look out of the window to ease her hurting eyes.

She had been very aware that Sarah was not meant to be a friend when she first arrived but a companion to keep her out of trouble. However, their bond had been strong, and Sarah had never betrayed Cassandra's confidence.

Her parents must have thought Sarah was a good influence. In reality, the two women were just as adventurous as each other. Sarah had said as long as she expressed herself, within reason, then she didn't have a problem with what her charge did.

That Cassandra would be forever grateful for.

“Do you think I’ll manage in Society, Sarah?” Cassandra looked down at herself. “Will people like me as I am?”

Sarah smiled, her eyes sparkling.

“I think they’re going to love you, darling. Especially with your wealth and beauty. That is definitely going to be attractive.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better, Sarah. Wealth and beauty are only on the surface.” Cassandra gestured at herself. “It’s not me, is it?”

“It’s what you’re supposed to show off to everyone, but I think everyone will see what I do.” Sarah crossed the room and took her hands. “They’ll see a beautiful, gracious woman with a genuine smile and a natural disposition. You’ll be fine. I’m sure you’ll have the gentlemen lining up to get your attention.”

“But I don’t want gentlemen lining up. I just want to meet new people. Fall in love on my own terms.”

“I’m sure that will happen regardless.”

Cassandra hoped so. She liked to do things at her own pace. There was no point rushing into things when she didn’t know how it was going

to go. She wanted to weigh all of her options before deciding not get thrust into the middle of it all. That was just not fair. Her parents were asking for too much, too fast.

Neither of them would listen to her on it.

“I don’t think my parents will approve, though. My idea of a husband is different to theirs.”

“I know. But there will be a time when they realize that you’re not someone they can mould. I’m sure they will trust your judgement at some point.”

“I don’t think they will.”

Sarah squeezed her friend’s hands.

“We don’t know until it happens. You might even find someone they consider suitable. Just as long as you pick and choose when to show the real person who you really are and not be so upfront about it all the time, you’ll manage the ton perfectly. I know you will.”

Pick and choose. Cassandra could do that. She didn’t want to be something she wasn’t and get married, only for her husband to realize that she was anything but what he expected. If he couldn’t accept her as she was, then he wasn’t worth marrying.

A quiver of excitement started building in her belly. While she didn’t

like the idea of being paraded around, she was looking forward to actually stepping out of the estate and meeting new people. Making new friends. Cassandra wanted to make an impression and find people her own age to talk to. That would make things a little brighter for her.

She could only hope she didn't make a fool of herself with her restricted and sheltered lifestyle.

"Come on, Cassie." Sarah tugged her towards the dressing table. "I've got to finish brushing your hair. Then we need to get to bed. We've got a dress fitting for you tomorrow."

Chapter 2

“How do I look?” Cassandra asked, looking at herself in the mirror.

Sarah appeared behind her and grinned.

“You look gorgeous, Cassie. I think you’ll be drawing the eye with everyone in that dress.”

Her new dress was fitted to her body like a glove, her corset fastened tightly, and her gloves covering her hands. It was a beautiful material in pale pink, and Cassandra had decided it was worth getting stuck with pins to get it to where it was. But she still felt like she was made up with too much. She was nervous about leaving the room. Would her parents approve?

Why do you want your parents’ approval when you haven’t looked for it before?

I shouldn’t, but I do.

Deep down, Cassandra wanted her mother and father to approve of something she did or how she presented herself. They had a fixed idea of what they wanted, and Cassandra knew her coming out was based on what they decided for her. If she followed some of their rules and kept her head down, maybe they would see that she could be trusted and relax a little.

It was a stretch, but Cassandra hoped that would be the case. She wanted tonight to go well, and then perhaps they would let her go to more social gatherings without hovering around her.

Tonight would be a test for all of them. It was a ball, a local one that was much smaller than the usual dances, but it was where the people Cassandra needed to interact with would be present. She could do that. While she was excited to meet more people and make some friends, she wasn't sure if she would manage if her first outing into Society was in a huge crowd. Start small, Sarah said.

Hopefully, tonight wouldn't be too bad. If Cassandra could actually leave the room.

Sarah took her arm, steering her towards the door.

"We'd better go downstairs before your father comes searching for us. We're going to be late if you carry on staring at yourself in the mirror."

"Oh. I..."

Sarah smiled.

"Cassie, I know you're nervous, but you're going to be fine. You'll make a lasting impression there, and you know it."

“I do, but....” Cassandra sighed. “I wish my excitement and nerves weren’t mixing together. It’s making me feel strange.”

“It’s perfectly normal. I felt like that the first time I entered Society. But you get used to it.” Sarah shrugged. “In my case, I was just unlucky. I faded into the background. You have no chance of that happening to you.”

Cassandra wasn’t so sure about that. But it was unfair for Sarah to think she was less than her. However, it was the mentality her friend had been given by her parents, not to mention everyone around her.

Her lower status and being perceived as plain had her being unattractive for a good match. Cassandra knew the only reason her father agreed to let Sarah be his daughter’s companion was that he believed there was no competition and Cassandra wouldn’t be overshadowed.

Cassandra didn’t see it that way. Both she and Sarah were the same height, both slim. Sarah was dark-haired to Cassandra’s blonde hair, and it was a more reasonable length that she could curl, but that didn’t make her any less attractive. If anything, Cassandra thought her friend was the prettier one, especially when she smiled and had that twinkle in her eye.

It wasn’t nice to see her friend being treated as a second-class citizen, but Sarah kept her head held high and focused her attention on Cassandra. She didn’t let it bother her.

Cassandra wished she was able to let things wash off her like that.

They headed downstairs. Her parents were in the foyer, already in their outdoor garments, ready to go. Lady Mandrake gasped as her daughter came down the stairs.

“Oh, Cassandra! You look lovely. Mrs Dennis did wonders for you.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

Cassandra glanced at her father and held her breath. Lord Mandrake looked her up and down, nodding curtly.

“You tidy up really well.” He said briskly with an approving smile. “I can see you catching the eye of many gentlemen.”

“But this is only my first time entering Society, Father. Shouldn’t I just get to know people?”

“You still need to think about a match, Cassandra.”

Lady Mandrake was also nodding. Cassandra sighed.

“Father, it’s too much pressure. I just want to meet a wider circle of people. Get to know them first. Then I’ll look for a husband once I’m comfortable with my company.” She clasped her hands together. “Please, Father? I don’t want to have too much on my shoulders.”

Mandrake pursed his lips. He didn't look too happy about doing that. But then he nodded.

"We'll see."

Cassandra's heart sank. That meant he wouldn't listen to her at all. He was just going to go around the room and look for someone willing to marry a girl who had been so sheltered she had no idea how to talk to anyone who wasn't Sarah or her parents. The fact that she was a Duke's daughter would make her a good match, but Cassandra didn't think so.

This was not going to go well if they had different ideas about how the evening would turn out.

The carriage ride was quiet, both of her parents sitting across from Cassandra and Sarah, not looking at either of the women or each other. Instead, they just looked out of their respective windows, sat straight with their hands resting on their thighs. Despite the fact they were sitting next to each other, they might as well have been sitting with several feet between them.

Matches were more common than love when it came to marriage, but the more Cassandra looked at her parents, the more determined she became that she didn't want to turn out like this. Neither of her parents looked happy. Just resigned to their situation. Had they always been like this? She didn't know. In her mind, they had always been stiff and strict, with very little love between them.

Cassandra hoped that her future husband, if she ever found one, wouldn't treat her like her father treated her mother. She wanted to

have a man who respected and loved her, who wanted to be in the same room as her because of genuine want and not because of necessity.

Someone who wasn't afraid to kiss her in front of people when they weren't in mixed company. Someone who didn't mind that she spoke what she really thought and didn't chastise her for talking out of turn.

If there had to be a match, Cassandra couldn't really argue. But she hoped that the man in question treated her better than what she was seeing before her. The Duke and Duchess of Mandrake might have been married for twenty years, but they just looked like they would rather be anywhere else.

Maybe it just worked. Maybe they had come to an agreement. On the other hand, they were certainly together on opinions when it came to their daughter, so perhaps they had a way of getting through their married lives.

If it worked, it worked. Although Cassandra couldn't see how. She just hoped she didn't end up like that.

They arrived at the house where the ball was being hosted. It was on the edge of Lake Windermere, the drive itself having a splendid view of the huge expanse of water. The setting sun had the water glistening like there were jewels beneath the surface. That was one advantage of living out in the Lake District; the landscape was just stunning. Cassandra could never get bored with her surroundings.

They alighted from the carriage and headed into the house. Mandrake greeted the host and hostess. As he shook hands with the host and bowed to the hostess, Cassandra, her mother, and Sarah took off their

cloaks, and they were taken away.

Then Cassandra was aware of the loud babble of voices coming from another room. Even with the door shut, it was loud. From the outside, she had seen a lot of people through the windows into a large room. Her mother had said this was a small gathering, but it looked like the entire village had come along.

Her chest was beginning to tighten, and she was struggling to breathe. Cassandra swayed, the room tilting a little. Sarah stepped in close and took her arm to steady her.

“Are you all right, Cassie?” She whispered. “What is it?”

“I...I’m not sure if I can go in right now. Too many people are in there.”

“How do you know? We haven’t gone in there yet.”

“I just know.” It was getting harder to breathe. The corset wasn’t helping, either. Cassandra clutched onto Sarah’s arm. “I need to get some air. Help me outside.”

“Of course.”

Sarah led Cassandra back out the front door and walked her around the side of the house into the gardens. Cassandra had considered telling her parents where she had gone, but Lady Mandrake had been

engrossed in a conversation with the hostess while the Duke was still talking to the host. Neither of them would want to be interrupted, although they wouldn't be happy that Cassandra wandered off on her own.

At this point, she didn't really care.

There was a stone bench by a hedge that lined a path to a huge set of double doors. Sarah led Cassandra to the bench and sat her down. Then she sat beside her.

"Better?" She asked.

"A little bit." Cassandra pressed a hand to her chest and drew in slow, deep breaths. The cool air felt nice, and she was feeling less lightheaded. "I didn't think I would react like that before I even walked into the room."

"It's perfectly normal. You don't need to be ashamed." Sarah squeezed her hand. "We won't be disturbed here, so we can take a moment and then we'll go back inside. At least we can hide from your parents for a while."

That was good. Cassandra didn't want to be caught away from everyone and have her parents berate her for running away. She just needed to have a moment to gather her thoughts before she went inside. That wasn't too much to ask, was it?

Then she heard a door opening and voices and laughter spilling out into the garden. A moment later, the door closed, and Cassandra heard

a female voice take a sigh of relief.

“Well! It’s just charming tonight, but I think they invited too many people. It’s getting stuffy in there.”

“It’s certainly lovely to see everyone come together, especially on a beautiful evening.” A second female voice reached their ears. “Do you think they’ll allow us to move the party into the garden?”

“I’m sure they won’t mind. By the way, did you see that the Duke and Duchess of Mandrake have arrived? I thought I recognized them, but I couldn’t be sure.”

Cassandra straightened up. They were discussing her parents? She debated whether or not she should make herself known - neither woman could see her or Sarah with the hedge in the way - but then the next comment had her stopping herself from appearing before them.

“That was definitely them. I would recognize them anywhere. And they came with their daughter as well?”

“Which one? The plain dark-haired one or the blonde one?”

“The blonde girl. She looks like her mother, without a doubt.” The second woman declared. “I wasn’t expecting to see her here.”

“Neither was I!” The first lady sighed. “She looked like a frightened

rabbit, poor thing.”

“I’m not surprised. She was meant to enter Society last year. From what I remember, Lady Cassandra is almost nineteen. She should have come out a year ago, and yet her parents refused to let her enter at all. There has to be something wrong with her to have a late coming out.”

Cassandra froze. They thought she had something wrong with her? The first lady laughed.

“Oh, you think too much, Margaret! I’m sure it’s nothing to do with the girl. Her parents are rather strict. You know things have to be on their terms.”

“I suppose,” Margaret grunted. There was a rustling of skirts. “I don’t know why anyone invites them to anything. I can’t stand either of them. They’re not very nice people, and from the brief look, I got before their daughter ran off, they’ve browbeaten the poor child. No doubt they’ve got something planned for her.”

“Like finding her a husband.” The first woman added. She tittered. “I must say, I can’t see a simple child like her getting a good marriage without them getting involved. They will probably have to hold her hand the whole time.”

“I would be humiliated if I had to hold my daughter’s hand throughout her adulthood. It can’t be easy, but with parents like them, it’s hardly surprising.”

Cassandra felt like her stomach had dropped. The air was feeling much colder than it had been a few minutes ago. They thought she had something wrong with her. Her parents' refusal to let her come out the year before had given people an opinion of her before she had even entered the room.

How was she going to face people when they thought of her in such a manner?

"Anyway," the second woman went on with a bright tone, "I think we're going to get a lot of interesting drama tonight with the young ladies present. Did you see who arrived a short while ago?"

"Who?"

"The Duke of Sandringham. The Scotsman who's been staying with the army officer in the village."

"Oh." The first woman paused. "Isn't he the one who brought his family back to a respectable position after his father gambled away their fortune? I seem to remember hearing about it from my neighbours a few days ago. Is that the same man?"

"That's the one. He arrived with Lieutenant Smith, and they've been hovering in a corner ever since. I don't think they've interacted with anyone unless they were actually approached. The young ladies have attempted to talk to him, but the Duke seems rather shy."

“Shy?” There was some laughter. “He didn’t strike me as the type to be shy.”

“I suppose men are just nervous about being around so many people when they’ve been out of it for so long. He’ll certainly have a lot of ladies vying for his attention.”

“I know what you mean.” Cassandra heard a wistful sigh. “If I was twenty years younger, I would be doing the same.”

“I would be right there with you. Come on, Amy, let’s go back inside. It’s starting to get a little chilly. The wind from the lake seems to be coming up rather rapidly this evening.”

The voices faded away, and then there was a door closing, followed by deafening silence. Cassandra felt her stomach rolling. She was going to end up being sick in a moment. She was sure of it. These people had never met her, and they had already made a judgement on her. They believed she was some sort of simple fool who had to be kept close to her parents. A stupid child.

How was she meant to go inside and get to know people when they had made up their minds on what she was like? Cassandra hadn’t thought she could make an impression when she wasn’t even there, but she had. And it was horrible.

“Cassandra?” Sarah gently shook her shoulder. “Cassandra.”

She had almost forgotten that her friend was with her. Cassandra

pressed a hand to her churning stomach. Her excitement about coming out for the first time had melted away, and now all she wanted to do was leave.

“They think I’m simple.” She whispered. “They think that something’s wrong with me.”

“Oh, Cassie.” Sarah squeezed her hand. “It’s not like that. They’re just looking for something to gossip about. Just ignore them.”

“How can I, Sarah? They were specifically talking about me, and it wasn’t very nice.” Cassandra closed her eyes and shuddered. “God, I want to go home.”

The thought of staying back on the estate was becoming very tempting. Cassandra didn’t think that would happen. Whatever confidence she had was now gone. How could she brush off the assumption that she had something wrong with her because she had been kept away for what was meant to be her first Season?

Sarah rose to her feet, trying to tug Cassandra up.

“Come on, Cassie, you’re stronger than this. Your father said he wanted you out in Society, and this is your opportunity. You’ve been looking forward to this for a long time.”

“Now I don’t want to do it.”

Sarah paused. Then she dropped down to kneel in front of her, taking Cassandra's face in her hands.

"Look at me, Cassie. Take deep breaths. Nice and easy. In, and out...."

Cassandra followed her instructions. It took a moment before the tightening around her chest eased, and she was able to breathe a little better. She hadn't realized how close she had been getting to becoming hysterical. Blinking back the tears, Cassandra concentrated on her breathing. Sarah gave her a gentle smile.

"You're a strong woman, Cassandra Felton. You're confident, adventurous, and brave. You will be able to go in there and hold your head high. You will be able to enjoy yourself, and I know you'll be leaving with a smile on your face. This is what you've wanted to do for a year now, so make the most of it." She rose to her feet. "You're going to show those gossiping old ladies that you're perfectly fine, and you're not the simpleton they believe. Bring forth that confidence I see every day and use it. You can get through this."

There were times like this that made Cassandra glad Sarah was her friend. She was level-headed, and she was able to calm Cassandra down from anything, be it an angry outburst or a panic attack. It felt good to know that she had a person close by who had her best interests at heart and gave her the nudge to feel good about herself.

Cassandra had no idea how she had managed before Sarah came along, but she was relieved that she was here now.

They had to go back in. Her parents would be looking for her now. Taking a deep breath, Cassandra stood up and squeezed Sarah's hand.

“All right. Let’s go back in.”

Sarah got to her feet and grinned, dusting down her skirts.

“Good. I know you could do it. We don’t have to be here long. How about we give it two hours and see how it goes? If you’re enjoying yourself, we’ll stay longer. But if you want to go home, I’ll make our excuses, and we can go home. Fair enough?”

Cassandra nodded. That sounded like a plan. Even though she felt more prepared about going inside, it didn’t stop her heart from racing as they headed up to the outside doors, seeing everyone inside through the large windows. Were they going to get in without anyone noticing? Or was everyone going to turn around and openly stare at them? Cassandra hoped that wouldn’t be the case.

Sarah opened the door and let Cassandra go in first. The music from the orchestra to the right of them hit her first, and then the babble of voices from the crowd. It wasn’t as crowded as she expected. The majority of the guests dotted around the edge of the room.

In the centre, people were dancing around, moving with their partners as if they had been doing this since they could walk. That did worry her a little; Cassandra could dance, but her only dance partner had been Mrs McMahon. She had only done the basic dances, and she had never danced the waltz. Her former governess had said it was not an appropriate dance.

There was a lot she needed to learn if she wanted to have a dance partner.

A few people close by did turn around and look at them, and Cassandra caught one lady whispering to another, but then they turned away again and got involved in their own conversation. A couple of gentlemen looked over and gave her a nod of greeting, a nod which Cassandra returned. But people were getting on with their own thing.

Maybe this wasn't going to be as bad as she thought. As long as Cassandra chose her words carefully and had Sarah with her, she would be able to get through this.

Her excitement picked up again. Good, she wanted to feel better about herself tonight. This was her chance to meet other people and show that she was perfectly capable of conducting herself in polite society.

Then her gaze was caught by a tall, broad-shouldered man across the room, on the other side of the orchestra. He was dressed in a fine dark blue suit, his dark hair cut short. His skin was a beautiful golden brown, which said that he had spent a lot of time in the sun.

He was talking to a tall, lanky young man in an army uniform, the marks on his shoulders and sleeves indicating that he was an officer. Neither of them seemed to be paying attention to their surroundings.

Cassandra felt her heart flutter. Who was that man? He looked like a high-ranking noble, although his body language indicated he would rather be anywhere else. And the look on his face had Cassandra pausing. He looked...sad. Haunted, she might have gone with.

What did he have to be sad about? She had a sudden urge to go over to him and ask what was wrong, but that was far too forward. Instead, clearing her throat, Cassandra nudged her friend.

“Sarah, do you know who that is over there?”

“Where?”

“The man standing with the army officer.” Cassandra nodded in the gentleman’s direction. “Any idea who he is?”

Sarah looked. And her eyes widened.

“Oh. That’s the Duke of Sandringham.”

“The man those two ladies were talking about a short while ago?”

“Yes, that’s him. I’ve heard about him.” Sarah leaned towards her and lowered her voice to a conspiratory whisper. “He’s eligible, so lots of people have been talking about him. I heard about it when I went to the village on my day off.”

“I see.” Cassandra tried not to stare, but it was difficult. The Duke of Sandringham drew the eye, and it was hard to pull away. “I can see why women are falling over themselves to get his attention.”

“Oh.” Sarah raised her eyebrows. “You like the look of him, then?”

Did she? Cassandra hadn’t expected that. She hadn’t planned on finding a man attractive as soon as she walked into the room. And from the way the Duke was standing, barely glancing around the room, he didn’t look very approachable. But there was something about him that drew Cassandra towards him. Something was gnawing away at him. That much was clear.

If only there was a way she could find out. Or even just talk to him. Cassandra wanted to do that. But, unfortunately, she needed her father to introduce them, and she didn’t want to tell her father that she wanted to speak to a gentleman with the haunted expression.

Why not? He’s a Duke, and your father was looking for someone worthy enough to marry you. This would be perfect.

Why do I get the feeling Father would disapprove?

Cassandra jumped when she heard her name. Turning, she saw her father coming around the edge of the dancefloor, Lady Mandrake just behind him. He didn’t look too happy as he detached Cassandra from Sarah and pulled her away.

“Where on earth did you go?” He hissed. “We’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“I was outside, Father. I couldn’t breathe.”

Mandrake huffed.

“You’re going to embarrass us if you keep running off like that. Remember your manners, Cassandra!”

“I haven’t forgotten them, Father.” Cassandra eased her arm away and faced Mandrake. “And I won’t forget now.”

Mandrake nodded curtly.

“Good. Now, come along with me. I want you to meet a few friends of mine.”

Cassandra nodded, but she found herself glancing over at the Duke of Sandringham as they walked away. She would rather be introduced to him, but she didn’t think that was going to happen. Not with the way her father was leading her to the other end of the room towards a group of men that made Cassandra want to run away again.

But she fixed a smile on her face and fell into step beside her father. If she was being given this opportunity to finally enter Society, she would make the most of it.

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